COMMUNITY-BASED THEATER AND PERSONS WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES:
AN INVESTIGATION OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DEVELOPMENT, SOCIAL
ACTIVISM, AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2010

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ABSTRACT

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The present study is a qualitative inquiry focused on understanding community-based theater involving people living with psychiatric disabilities through the narratives of the troupe members and directors. The study uses a grounded theory case study design to investigate *The Stars of Light* theater troupe in Rockford, Illinois. The research specifically explores the developmental processes of the troupe and its members, social activism, and critical characteristics of the theatrical form. The project addresses individual, setting/group, and community levels of analysis using semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and archival/performance data. Emergent themes were analyzed through a hierarchical coding process that ultimately generated 18 theoretical constructs across the three primary domains of interest (developmental processes, social activism, and characteristics of theater). Findings indicate that individual, setting, and organizational characteristics interact with one another in a variety of ways, including 1) troupe flexibility enhances sustainability and personal growth, 2) personal gains from involvement are carried forward into other life settings outside the troupe, and 3) troupe activities impact the wider community in several ways beyond direct audience contact. Results also revealed emergent constructs related to the identity development of consumer participants, setting dynamics and trajectories, and theater as a means of aiding in the recovery process. These constructs are discussed in relation to previous research and theory related to recovery, identity and serious mental illness (SMI), consumer-driven programs, and arts initiatives. Specific recommendations are presented for mental health settings, theater
settings, and activist organizations; study limitations and suggestions for future inquiry are also discussed.
Dedicated to

Howard B. Faigin

My endlessly loving grandfather who showed me the

importance of flexibility, compassion, and humor
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of completing this project brought me a broader array of knowledge and personal fulfillment than I could have imagined. First and foremost, I want to share my gratitude and deep appreciation for my advisor Dr. Catherine Stein. She served as a crucial mentor to me throughout my graduate career, and throughout the process of conducting this research. I will never forget her astute and heartfelt guidance, endless patience, and the respect she shows to all of her students and all persons living with chronic mental illness. I also thank the other members of my committee Drs. Kenneth Pargament, Jennifer Gillespie, and Peterann Seihl. Their assistance throughout the conceptualization and implementation of the project was invaluable. I give thanks for the endless encouragement, wisdom, assistance and love of my incredible wife Carol Ann. Her presence breathes more compassion, knowledge of heart, and inspiration into my life with every day. My immense thanks goes to the members of The Stars of Light and the wonderful people at the Janet Wattles Center, without whose support and participation this project would never have been possible. Special thanks to Mary Gubbe Lee, the troupe’s managing director, for her extensive assistance throughout the project. Special thanks also goes to my research team, Drs. Hisham Abu-Raiya and Kristen Abraham, Shinakee Gumber, and Jodi Lynn Murdoch, who played a crucial role in coding and interpreting data. In addition, I want to thank my entire family, my parents Martin and Barbara, my sister Jennifer, and the Caprini Family for all their support and encouragement. I also want to share my deepest thanks to my best friends and colleagues Joshua Buckholtz, Dr. Hisham Abu-Raiya and Sean Brosnan for their enduring support, love and humor. Finally, I acknowledge my grandfather Howard Faigin whom I love and dearly miss. He supported me during the course of this study, but did not live to see its completion. I dedicate this project to him.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

People living with psychiatric disabilities face a variety of complex struggles in their lives. Besides finding treatment and support systems that help them cope with their illnesses, they face continual challenges in finding valued roles in employment and community settings. However, grass-roots, consumer-run programs and advocacy efforts have developed over recent years in order to help people with psychiatric disabilities work toward recovery from their illness, provide mutual support, and engage in efforts to change public attitudes about mental illness. Previous research has addressed community-based efforts that achieve these goals, such as psychosocial rehabilitation and clubhouses for consumers. Yet, more research is needed to investigate the power of community-based arts initiatives as an innovative setting. One such setting is theater groups involving people living with psychiatric disabilities.

In order to broaden our understanding of the ways that such theater troupes affect the lives of participants, an in-depth look at their lived experience is needed. The present qualitative inquiry investigates an exemplar theater troupe composed of adults living with psychiatric disabilities to explore the inner workings of the troupe, identify factors involved in their creative process, and explore the challenges and triumphs involved in sharing their experiences with the wider community. The research is designed to better understand issues of social activism, group developmental processes, and characteristics of the theatrical modality at the individual, setting, and community level. A review of relevant literature on community integration, people coping with psychiatric disabilities, community-based theater, and qualitative methods is presented to provide a framework for the present research.
Community Participation and Empowerment

Community participation and integration has been a central topic of inquiry for community psychologist and other social sciences (Hughey & Speer, 2002; Maton, 1989; Wandersman & Florin, 1999; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Previous research investigating community participation has addressed issues such as empowerment, psychological sense of community, stress and coping, and organizational characteristics. Researchers have specifically looked at issues such as individual characteristics of people who participate, environmental characteristics that facilitate or inhibit effective participation, and the benefits and costs related to participation on individuals and communities (Wandersman & Florin, 1999). Wandersman and Florin point out multiple benefits that can result from citizen participation. These benefits include improved quality of the environment, helping individuals develop plans and programs that better fit their needs and values, increased feelings of helpfulness and responsibility, as well as decreased feelings of alienation (Wandersman & Florin, 1999).

Research on the empowering effects of community participation and integration has yielded a wealth of data regarding how people connect, thrive, and take action in their communities (Itzaky & York, 2000; Katz, 1984; Kieffer, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). In his widely sited work, Kieffer (1984) explored citizen empowerment and participation by interviewing members of a wide array of grass-roots organizations. The goal of the study was to articulate descriptors of experience regarding participants’ process of becoming more empowered. Kieffer used a depth-interview method that involved reflexive dialogue with the participants, and then offered verbatim transcripts to the participants to offer them the opportunity to validate and refine emergent interpretations. The results of his inquiry led him to posit a theory of empowerment as a long-term and continuing process of adult development. He
found that narratives of life course and organizational involvement interact with issues of race, class, gender and power. He articulates the stages of the developmental process as 1) the era of entry, 2) the era of advancement, 3) the era of incorporation, and 4) the era of commitment. Tied together with this developmental conceptualization, Kieffer argues that empowerment can be viewed as a personal development of “participatory competence” (Kieffer, 1984).

Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) classified a community sample on levels of community/organizational participation and analyzed responses to 11 psychological empowerment indexes. They found that greater participation in community activities and organizations is associated with higher scores on psychological empowerment. They conclude that this individually centered conceptualization of empowerment can be described as “the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in, the public domain” (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988, p. 746). Itzacky and York (2000) however suggest that not all participation is necessarily perceived as affecting empowerment. Results from their study with members of a low-income community in central Israel suggests that,

Being a participant in an organization and even feeling that one is part of a decision-making process may have psychological effects on the participant, but it may not be enough to bring about the complex effect of psychological empowerment. To achieve empowerment the participant must begin to feel that he or she represents fellow citizens… and is seen by them as their representative. (Itzacky & York, 2000, p. 231)

This highlights the importance of seeing citizens as socially and politically situated members of their communities and neighborhoods. This quote raises issues regarding social status and representation. As community participation and integration affect people living with
psychiatric disabilities, it is important to consider what social and systemic barriers may serve to exclude these citizens, and affect their sense of representing others.

Community Participation, Social Activism, and People with Psychiatric Disabilities

Research focusing on community participation and people living with psychiatric disabilities can generally be split into two tracks. One track addresses participation, roles, and outcomes in community-based settings (Bassman, 2001; Felton, 2005; Nelson et al., 2006). The second track addresses issues relating to mental health services, housing, and employment (Bond et al., 1997; Gulcur et al., 2007; Yanos et al., 2007). Spanning these two tracks in the literature are issues of personal choice, opportunities for mutual support, and “recovery” ideology. Recently, research has worked to develop a multi-factor model (Wong & Soloman, 2002) of community integration for people living with psychiatric disabilities. Gulcer and her colleagues (2007) conducted a project in a large urban setting to test this model. They found support for a conceptualization of community integration that incorporates psychological, physical, and social domains involving individually and environmental factors (Gulcer et al., 2007).

One of the ways in which individuals with psychiatric disabilities have historically engaged local and national communities is through advocacy and social activism (Anspach, 1979; Chamberlin, 1978; McCoy & Aronoff, 1994). For many years mental health consumers and their supporters have organized and demanded their voices be heard. These individuals and groups have become involved in discourse regarding issues such as quality of mental health services, stigma, access to services, and forced hospitalization. The consumer/psychiatric survivor movement has focused a great deal on speaking for themselves and insisting that society hear about their lived experiences unadulterated by the medical and psychological establishments (Bassman, 2001; Cook & Jonikas, 2002). McCoy & Aronoff (1994) used a grounded theory
case-study design to investigate a consumer-run alternative services organization called Alternatives By Consumers (ABC). Findings from this project highlighted the ways in which identity politics, revitalization and recovery, and social activism blended together in this organization, and offered mental health consumers a unique means of community engagement. The authors comment that the group’s activities allowed members to,

…draw on their experiential expertise and offer legitimate critique of conventional mental health care, support their peers, and incorporate what is helpful in the mental health system without depriving themselves of needed services. [For members] the merger of political activism and revitalization processes not only contributes to changed definitions of self and situation, it creates a community around a more positive definition of members’ social identity. (McCoy & Aronoff, 1994, p. 379)

Since the historic foundation of the Fountain House in New York City, community-situated “clubhouses” have become increasingly prevalent in the United States. These consumer-run settings offer people with psychiatric disabilities a setting where they can enhance their personal recovery and rehabilitation, build social and community connections, as well as develop advocacy efforts. Consumer activists affiliate themselves with established mental health systems to differing degrees. Whatever the extent of the affiliation, it seems the goals of social activism and personal recovery processes are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, efforts to attain these goals may influence and facilitate one another.

Community-based Theater

One of the ways in which citizens with a variety of social identities come together to be heard and influence their communities is through “applied,” or community-based theater (Boon & Plastow, 2004; Nicholson, 2005). “Applied” drama or theater is a term used to describe “forms
of dramatic activity that primarily exist outside conventional mainstream theater institutions, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies” (Nicholson, 2005, pg.2). These are interdisciplinary and hybrid practices based within a wide variety of contexts around the world. One popular form of applied drama in the United States is community-based theater. Community-based theater is a type of socio-political theater that takes a critical position toward social issues, aims to raise awareness, and works to alleviate social frustrations and conflict (Boehm & Boehm, 2003). Through participation and community partnerships theater arts projects are created by collective effort from start to finish.

Depending on the needs, concerns, resources, and political climate of the time, community-based theater has manifested itself differently in various geographical and historical settings. Community-based theater has also been shaped over time into a variety of internationally recognized approaches or “schools.” Some of these include: Theater of the Oppressed (TO) (Boal, 1979), Forum or Playback Theater, and Theater for Development (TfD) (Boon & Plastow, 2004). One quality that all of these approaches have in common is that they function from a community/citizen empowerment and social justice perspective. In addition, all of these theater traditions appreciate the dialogical nature and ongoing process of creating empowering theater workshops and performances. Boon and Plastow (2004) collected the experiences and narratives of a wide array of practitioners of community-based theater from around the world. Their goal was to illustrate what “empowerment” can mean for people and communities involved in grassroots theater. In the introduction to their edition they speak to some commonalities of all the projects they investigate,

…By enabling people to discover and value their own humanity, both individually and in relation to others, they seek to empower those involved to claim the status of creative,
thinking beings who have agency over the shaping of their lives and those of their families and communities. (Boon and Plastow, 2004, pg. 8)

Theater and People with Psychiatric Disabilities

The field of psychology has a long tradition of co-opting and incorporating theatrical expression and theory into psychological theory and therapeutic practice (Amabile, 1983; Landy, 1997). The union of theatrical expression and clinical psychology is perhaps best known in the context of the traditions of psychodrama (Fox, 1987) and drama therapy (Landy, 1997). Drama therapy has theoretical roots that span a wide array of psychological and sociological traditions. These traditions include psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, object relations theory, symbolic interaction theory, and humanistic approaches (Landy, 1997). In practice, dramatic techniques are used to stimulate personal exploration and therapeutic insights in many different ways. Drama has been used in a variety of therapeutic contexts to enhance self-esteem and self-knowledge, explore and process traumatic events, treat interpersonal disengagement, bolster creative problem solving skills, and treat personality and mood disorders (Landy, 1997; Pearson, 1996; Schnee, 1996).

Currently theatrical activities are available in a variety of settings involving people coping with mental illness. Outside of explicitly therapeutic contexts, people with psychiatric disabilities are currently involved in community partnerships with community theaters and psychosocial rehabilitation clubhouses (Faigin & Stein, 2010). Theatrical endeavors involving people living with psychiatric disabilities can address the members’ common experiences related to such things as stigma, hospitalization, and navigating mental health services. The commonalities in the lived experience of actors living with mental illness may also serve a mutually supportive function. Personal recovery narratives of people living with psychiatric
disabilities are found to highlight the importance of taking part in new valued roles and settings that enhance one’s appreciation of their own worth and skills (Davidson & Strauss, 1992; Ochocka et al., 2005). Theatrical endeavors may allow for the exploration and sharing of personal recovery narratives with other people coping with psychiatric disabilities, as well the wider communities in which they live.

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research methods are grounded in a variety of intersecting paradigms that have developed in response to various critiques of positivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Although these various paradigms fall along a wide spectrum of ideological and epistemological standpoints, a set of common assumptions can be identified. One fundamental assumption of qualitative inquiry is that classical positivist empirical methods are unable to help scientists adequately understand phenomena. In response, qualitative approaches assume that inquiry should take place in natural settings and build complex, holistic conceptualizations of phenomena (Creswell, 1998). Another assumption is that all knowledge should be seen as contextually based. Therefore, methods of inquiry should focus on contextual details that cannot be captured by standard quantitative methodology alone.

Another fundamental idea behind qualitative approaches is that research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. This situated-ness may relate to philosophical assumptions, class, race, gender, status, etc. Hence classical notions of the “objective” observer are rejected (Christians, 2000). Since qualitative approaches are generally interpretive, the values of the researcher are made explicit. Studying people and phenomena in their natural settings is assumed to allow for the elucidation of contextual factors that cannot be uncovered outside of that setting. Another fundamental assumption of qualitative inquiry is that phenomena should be
interpreted and reported in the words and meanings that participants bring to them (emic), rather than through the words and theories of the observer/researcher (etic). Yet another assumption is that contradictions or paradoxes in the setting or data should be welcomed and actively examined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Qualitative research methods are developed, applied and critiqued in a wide variety of disciplines including education, nursing, sociology, public health, anthropology, cultural and gender studies, psychology, and anthropology (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the last ten years, this form of inquiry has become more prevalent in community psychology (Stewart, 2000). Many community researchers have called for more acceptance and articulation of situational complexities and paradoxes that occur in the context of research and action (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rappaport, 2002).

Grounded Theory

The form of qualitative inquiry used in the present study is grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory assumes that theory should not be used to explain phenomena a priori. Rather, it states that theories should be emergent and “grounded” in the data itself (Creswell, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Theory is developed regarding phenomenon and people being studied that is deeply contextual. This is accomplished by a systematic method of narrative data collection along with reflexive and hierarchical data analytic procedures. Data, usually comprised of transcribed text from interviews with informants, is analyzed in a cyclical pattern until emergent categories are “saturated” (Creswell, 1998). Memoing and field notes are also used to record impression from interview experiences. These secondary texts are then synthesized with the primary source data.
Analysis in grounded theory methodology is both hierarchical and reflexive. The first level of coding is *open coding*, where initial categories are formed from the text. Next *axial coding* occurs, wherein data is assembled in new ways from the open codes to outline causal conditions and relevant elements of the context. *Selective coding* follows axial coding, wherein the researcher finds a “story line” that integrates categories and themes into meaningful propositions. The reflexive nature of grounded theory allows for a “constant comparative” method, whereby narrative data of informants are compared to emerging categories and field notes to better inform the axial coding process. Grounded theory methodology involves a team of researchers to allow for independent coding. Then inter-rater comparisons are used to highlight all relevant text and emergent themes. The group process also allows for discussion of ethical concerns and challenges presented by the data and the research process.

Qualitative approaches require slightly different articulations of reliability and validity as compared to quantitative methodology, given the lack of inferential statistics. “Justifiability of interpretations” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) is one way of articulating an alternative to the criteria of reliability and validity. The theoretical constructs and narrative produced from the data are considered to be valid and reliable to the extent that they are *transparent*, *communicable*, and *coherent*. *Transparency* concerns clarity pertaining to steps by which the researchers arrived at their interpretations. *Communicability* concerns the extent themes and constructs can be understood by other researchers and the participants themselves. *Coherence* regards how well constructs fit together and allow for the telling of a coherent story about the lived experiences of the participants. A central goal in grounded theory is to “saturate” meaningful categories as they emerge from the data. Finding the saturation point is ultimately a somewhat subjective endeavor,
but is helped by the constant comparative and collaborative methods used. Reliability can also be enhanced through use of triangulation of data collection methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Reflexivity**

*Reflexivity* requires an awareness of the researcher’s contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining “outside of” one’s subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity, then, urges us “to explore the ways in which a researcher’s involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research” (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 208).

Any qualitative inquiry presumes a certain theoretical framework and personal stance from which the researcher is viewing the project throughout the process of data collection and analysis. The epistemological assumptions at work have a great impact on what is expected from the conclusions of the study. Although researchers and theorists in psychology and sociology differ on the amount of attention that should be paid to personal vs. epistemological reflexivity, they are both considered important in qualitative research. In her analysis of qualitative research in psychology, Carla Willig describes the difference between these two types of reflexivity this way,

*Personal reflexivity* involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers…*epistemological reflexivity* encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings. (Willig, 2001, p. 10)
Reflexivity highlights the importance of considering ideological and personal characteristics of the researcher as an integral part of the qualitative research endeavor. Making assumptions and orientations of the qualitative researcher explicit allows the consumer of the research to situate the interpretations and methodological choices.

**Qualitative Inquiry and Psychiatric Disabilities**

Historically, qualitative approaches have been used by psychologists and nursing researchers to understand clients’ reactions to mental health services and system-level impacts of mental healthcare policy (Pulice et al., 1995). First-person narratives of people with psychiatric disabilities are increasingly prevalent in the literature. These narratives share the intricacies of people’s lived experience beyond the reporting of data from quantitative instruments that only measure such things as symptom prevalence and number of hospitalizations. Researchers have recently used qualitative approaches to incorporate the voices of people living with psychiatric disabilities in studies of recovery from mental illness (Davidson et al., 2005; Mancini et al., 2005; Ochocka et al., 2005) and employment (Honey, 2000; Rebeiro, 1999).

In their review of qualitative studies of recovery from psychiatric disabilities, Davidson and his colleagues (Davidson et al., 2005) identify a number of factors that encouraged the processes of recovery. These factors include feeling accepted and supported by others, mutuality and reciprocity in relationships, a sense of “giving back,” and reconstructing an effective sense of self as a social agent. They also emphasize that qualitative methods have a unique ability to elucidate the intricate web of external and internal factors influencing the lives of people with psychiatric disabilities (Davidson et al., 2005). Other research using qualitative approaches has focused on issues such as social losses and valued social roles (Stein & Wemmerus, 2001).
However there is a shortage of research addressing this population’s involvement in specific local contexts that offer opportunities spanning personal and community growth.

Summary and Critique

People coping with psychiatric disabilities have historically been positioned as “clients,” “vulnerable,” and “consumers of services.” They are defined in the public eye by their psychiatric diagnoses and by their disabilities. The recovery and consumer/survivor movements have worked to amplify the voices of this population, and advocate for more self-actualization and self-determination. These movements have also focused on combating stigma, and focuses discourse on peoples’ strengths. The advent of a more multi-dimensional view of community integration for this population is a needed advance. However the research literature does not reflect an adequate examination of the ways in which people with mental illness define community integration for themselves. Also lacking are formal examinations of how personal and group processes interact with second order change processes at the community level. Research is needed that investigates how these processes relate to such things as community awareness, access to resources, and policy. Overall, more studies are needed that address the connection between first-order and second-order change processes related to recovery, community integration, and people with psychiatric disabilities. Community-based theatrical groups involving this population are novel settings that may influence both levels of change.

Previous research has focused on developmental processes related to citizen participation and social activism (Kieffer, 1984) as well as processes of recovery from mental illness (Davidson et al., 2005) and consumer run organizations (Nelson et al., 2006). However there is a paucity of inquiry synthesizing these topics to understand how developmental processes overlap and interact with one another, as well as affect the lives of people with psychiatric disabilities in
the community. Investigating the developmental processes involved in community-based theater with people coping with psychiatric disabilities may help clarify the ways in which this population can maintain mutually supportive relationships with the communities in which they live. Such investigation may also allow for locally-situated articulations of the means by which persons and organizations overcome developmental hurdles.

Qualitative approaches have elucidated factors related to the recovery processes and the impact of consumer-run organizations. Yet these approaches have not yet been applied to exploring community-based theater involving people with psychiatric disabilities. Grounded theory seems especially suited for this task given the paucity of research in this area. Emergent themes may help inform the creation or expansion of settings involving theater and people with psychiatric disabilities. An in-depth look at an individual troupe may help identify specific characteristics and factors that help it develop and thrive. This case study approach may better inform theory than a broad survey of multiple troupes grounded in a priori assumptions about the therapeutic impacts of theater.

More research is needed that takes an ecological perspective in trying to understand the lives of people with psychiatric disabilities. This requires a simultaneous inquiry into individual narratives, setting characteristics, and the community milieu. This multi-level approach can help researchers better understand interactions between levels of analysis and challenges that hinder personal and community processes of change. One of the ways that people with psychiatric disabilities interact with and influence their community environments is through social activism and advocacy work. Increasingly, consumer voices are informing efforts to change mental health care policy and the public dialogue about mental illness. There is a need to understand how innovative community-based settings are serving to amplify these voices.
Previous research has highlighted positive psychological and social outcomes of theater projects in non-therapeutic settings. Populations of concern include such groups as marginalized women (Boehm & Boehm, 2003, Morrison, 1995) and students of various ages (Kennedy, 1990; Monks et al., 2001; Warren, 1993). However no formal research exists that explores the relevant psychological and social impacts of community-based theater with people living with psychiatric disabilities. Applied theater of various types seems a good fit for community members living with psychiatric disabilities. This is because applied theater focuses on processes of individual and community transformation and emancipation, and giving voice to marginalized communities (Nicholson, 2005; Taylor, 2003). Qualitative inquiry in this area could help to develop theory regarding how theater groups involving this population coalesce, interact with their communities, and thrive. This line of research could also serve to identify means to amplify the social change strategies of these community groups; as well as how group processes influence individuals’ lived experiences and social identities.

Finally, the impacts of theatrical activities on the lives of people with psychiatric disabilities have only been studied in the context of therapeutic interventions. Psychosocial rehabilitation settings skirt the border between traditional service provision and community-based opportunities for integration and empowerment. Studies are needed to explore how theatrical activities connected to psychosocial rehabilitation relate to and challenge this border. The present study is designed to directly address this need.
CHAPTER II. METHOD

The present study is a qualitative inquiry focused on understanding community-based theater involving people living with psychiatric disabilities through the narratives of the troupe members. The study uses a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) case study design to investigate *The Stars of Light* theater troupe in Rockford, Illinois. The research investigates the specific activities, impacts on troupe members’ lives, social activism, and developmental processes of the group. The project addresses individual, setting/group, and community levels of analysis using semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and archival/performance data.

Goals

The core goals of the present research were to learn about social activism and developmental processes of *The Stars of Light*, and document the troupe’s views on characteristics that allow theater to be a useful medium for personal growth and social change. The overarching goal of the project was to understand dimensions of: social activism, developmental processes, and characteristics of theater as a medium of engagement at three levels: 1) the individual level, 2) the setting/troupe level, and 3) the community level. This 3x3 design allowed for an examination of both positive and negative aspects of troupe membership and community interaction, and a description of sustainability and growth processes the troupe has experienced. Finally, the study investigated the ways in which future plans of the troupe are informed by past experiences and challenges.

Collecting and analyzing the lived experience of troupe members and the content of their performances allows for the articulation of themes that can inform theory related to theatrical activities and people living with psychiatric disabilities. Since the present study is solely
qualitative in nature, a primary goal was to use established qualitative methods and adhere to high standards of quality during the entire process.

Sample Selection

The screening criteria used to identify the troupe for study included: 1) the troupe or project must be currently active, 2) the troupe must explicitly identify as being comprised (at least in large part) of people living with psychiatric disabilities, 3) the troupe must have as a core goal a social change mission to educate their audiences about mental illness, and 4) the members must be able to speak English. These criteria preclude the need for translation procedures, and allow for a sample able to respond to the three dimensions of inquiry. The World Wide Web was used to find evidence of, and contact information for community-based projects that met the criteria for participation. Popular media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television were also culled for information regarding active theater troupes within the United States. Five troupes within the United States were initially identified that met criteria. *The Stars of Light* stood out as an exemplar troupe to partner with for the current study because they have existed longer than the other four groups, and their performance history indicates a large degree of connections and contact with other settings in the community (see Figure 2.1 below).

Troupe History

The Janet Wattles Center is a community mental health agency in Rockford, Illinois serving adults and children living in Winnebago County and surrounding areas. The agency provides a wide variety of services including individual, group, and family therapy, psychiatric services, vocational and educational rehabilitation, and psycho-social rehabilitation. In 1995 employees and consumers of the Janet Wattles Center formed a theater troupe composed of persons living with psychiatric disabilities. The troupe began as an offshoot of an expressive arts
therapy group but quickly expanded its goals to include community outreach and education regarding issues related to mental illness and recovery.

Between the troupe’s establishment in February 1995 and June 2009, the troupe presented 158 performances in front of live audiences, created seven short films for television/video, and recorded seven radio shows for public radio in Northern Illinois.\(^1\) On average, the troupe has created two original theater presentations per year, and presented an average of 14 performances a year since 1995 (see Table 2.1 below for detailed performance

\(^1\) Performance history data collected from archival sources offered to the research team by the troupe directors. Data regarding performance and organizational contact is collected yearly by the troupe.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Performances</th>
<th>Critical Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Professional video produced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Full-length play produced “Jumping to Delusions” Art gallery presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Video produced to educate law enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Personal stories added to performances Public Radio show produced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Limited performance schedule due to member availability Janet Wattles website expanded to include troupe info and activities First business plan created for troupe Public Radio show produced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Video produced addressing employment and recovery Public Radio show produced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Video produced about recovery from mental illness Public Radio show produced Troupe contributed to video on suicide prevention Art gallery presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Public Radio show produced Troupe celebrates 80th show at Winnebago Co. Courthouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Public Radio show produced Troupe celebrates 140th show Efforts to establish “Enlightenment Productions” as independent production group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Public Radio show produced Art gallery presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Art gallery presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Troupe celebrates 140th show Efforts to establish “Enlightenment Productions” as independent production group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Children’s book published translating stories presented in performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Partnership with researcher begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Funding cuts within Janet Wattles Center force troupe to apply for grant funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
history). Since being established the troupe has been continuously facilitated by the same
managing director (a staff member of Janet Wattles Center) and artistic director (a professional
actor/director who also leads the expressive arts therapy group). The original works of the troupe
regularly draw on actors’ personal experiences. A wide array of issues regarding mental illness,
stigma, and recovery are addressed in the troupe’s performances and visual art installations.
Further details regarding the content and process of their productions is described in chapter IV
below.

The managing director has collected data on the troupe’s activities since the troupe was
first established in 1995. Table 2.1 shows the total number of performances of *The Stars of Light*
from 1995 to 2009 (n=172, M=14). According to troupe members and the directors, factors that
have influenced the number of shows include: availability and scheduling constraints of hosting
agencies and settings, availability and scheduling constraints of troupe members, level of interest
of hosting agencies and settings, amount of travel and time commitments associated with
performances, and available planning time on the part of the managing director.

*The Stars of Light* have performed for a wide array of audiences, both in terms of setting
type and audience size. Figure 2.1 above represents a graphical representation of the total
performance history of the troupe by type of setting (n=172). The average audience size based on
estimates recorded at each live stage performance (not including radio and television
performances, n=158) is 77, with a range of 7 to ~500 audience members. The majority of the
troupe’s tour shows have taken place in or around the Rockford, Illinois area. However, the
troupe has traveled as far away as Washington D.C. to perform for an Association of Ambulatory
Behavioral Healthcare (AABH) conference, where the troupe also received an award for their
work in community-based efforts to reduce stigma.
The primary rehearsal space and meeting point for the troupe is The Silver Lining Club in Rockford, IL. This location is a community-based psychosocial rehabilitation clubhouse run by the Janet Wattles Center organization. The clubhouse follows the Fountain House model (Beard, Propst & Malamud, 1982) and offers meals, job counseling and training, computer and clerical services, recreational activities, and a variety of therapeutic groups. The structure of the operating hours centers on the “work-ordered day” wherein clubhouse consumers/members take part in a variety of critical jobs around the facility, with constant access to support staff. *The Stars of Light* stores the majority of their props and equipment at the Silver Lining Club when not being used for performances in the community.

**Participants**

The participants for this study included all seven current troupe members *The Stars of Light* theater troupe, two past troupe members, and the artistic and managing directors (n= 11; See Table 2.2 below for individual sample characteristics). Individual interviews were conducted with all 11 participants. Table 2.2 indicates those participants who also took part in the focus group.

**Research Team**

The present study involved recruitment of research assistants to help with data collection, transcription, and analysis. A team of five research assistants were recruited: four graduate students the psychology department, and one graduate student from the theater department. An initial meeting was held with the research team to outline the purpose, procedures, and timeline for the study. Subsequent meetings were then held throughout the data collection process to share field notes and discuss the process of partnership with the troupe. The
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Troupe Member at Time of Study</th>
<th>Length of Involvement</th>
<th>Primary Diagnosis</th>
<th>Focus Group member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Major Depression, Schizoid PD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Bipolar I</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Bipolar I w/ psychosis</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Bipolar I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Bipolar I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Bipolar I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Major Depression</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Bipolar I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Major Depression</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam (Artistic Director)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer (Managing Director)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All names are pseudonyms

Duties of the research team members included: reviewing literature regarding grounded theory and qualitative data analysis, attending regular research team meetings to discuss project tasks and analyze data, transcription of interviews, and analysis of archival materials and media products. Only one of the researchers traveled to Rockford, Illinois with the primary researcher on one occasion to assist with note taking and facilitation of the focus group. None of the other research assistants had any personal contact with any of the participants.
Theoretical Orientation

A few words regarding my personal history may help the reader theoretically situate the present research. Having worked therapeutically with adults living with psychiatric disabilities in a variety of community settings, my perspective on the population has primarily formed around the stories, hopes, fears, successes, and reflections of the people with whom I have met in these settings. Personal experience with psychosocial rehabilitation informs my belief that community-based activities can allow people with psychiatric disabilities important opportunities such as development of new skills, social connections, and valued social roles.

My personal experience in theater and the performing arts has a major impact on my sense of personal creative potential, the power that theater can have on audiences’ hearts and minds, and the joys of creating art in a group context. I have also had the opportunity to work with adults with psychiatric disabilities in a theatrical context. I witnessed first hand how personal histories and unique perspectives of these actors inform the creative process and the desire to reach out to the wider community through theater. I do not assume outright that theater is a panacea for all social skills deficits of all people with psychiatric disabilities, or the best way to inform audiences about the realities of living with mental illness. However, I do believe that only through a qualitative approach can the nuances of the lived experiences of the actors be useful to identify relevant positive and negative impacts of theater arts initiatives involving this population.

Given my previous experience working within theatrical modalities with persons with psychiatric disabilities, my role in partnering with The Stars of Light in this study can be considered one of “insider/outside” (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). I am an insider, in my connection to the population and field of theater. However, I have not had any prior contact with
this particular troupe of actors or the mental health settings in Rockford, Illinois. Therefore I am also somewhat situated as an outsider. This blended role was discussed in detail with the troupe and research team at the outset of the study.

Coming from a perspective of critical theory and community/systems, I believe there is merit in exploring the social and political ramifications of activities involving and impacting marginalized groups. Consumer-driven activities are influencing local and national mental healthcare policy by highlighting ways that mental health is tied to community integration and empowerment beyond the realms of employment and housing. These activities involve locally situated community partnerships, unique funding arrangements, and other factors that need to be examined in order to inform consumers and providers of mental health services. I believe an ethnographic examination of *The Stars of Light* is one opportunity to integrate an appreciation of how theater may serve to influence both first order and second order change for people with psychiatric disabilities.

**Ethical Considerations**

Given the methods and target population of the present research several ethical considerations need to be briefly addressed. The nature of the present study required extended and intensive contact with the participants. In order to saturate the themes that arose from the data, the study needed be reflexive. One example of this reflexivity is that themes and experiences gathered from individual interviews were fed back into the focus group discussion at several points. Therefore, the research team was especially sensitive to the impact that this could have on the troupe’s dynamics. It was imperative to avoid betraying the trust and confidentiality of individual participants, while still working to bring relevant issues and topics to a larger group discussion.
Another critical issue is that the inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant may also be exacerbated by the presence of a researcher who is both experienced in theater and a mental health care professional in training. Therefore, my role as researcher was heavily emphasized throughout the project, and it was made clear to the troupe that 1) interviews were in no way meant to be a therapeutic intervention, and 2) the project was not meant to judge the artistic quality of the troupe’s activities. Given the status of adults with psychiatric disabilities as a “vulnerable population,” special care was made to consider issues of exploitation and coercion throughout the project. Discussion among the research team and ongoing efforts to sustain a responsive and responsible partnership with troupe members and facilitators helped the team process and address ethical concerns as data was collected and analyzed. In addition, a reflexive journal was used throughout the course of the study to record biases, assumptions, and experiences that influence the inductive analytic process. This journal was also helpful in serving as a source of field notes that informed the exploration of the inquiry process discussed below.

Finally, the standard ethical concerns about confidentiality were somewhat complicated in this instance, as the troupe has already positioned itself in the public eye, with troupe members using their real names. American Psychological Association and Bowling Green State University ethical guidelines were used, adhering to the agreement that participants’ interview data would be kept anonymous. All real names and identifying information were redacted or changed for the purposes of report writing.

Data Collection

*Individual Interviews*

The primary source of data for the study are individual semi-structured interviews with the seven current and two past troupe members of *The Stars of Light*, as well as the troupe’s
artistic director and managing director. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of a set of open-ended questions exploring the participants’ experiences with the troupe, and there reflections on the community impact of the troupe’s activities. The questions included in the interview protocol (see Appendix A) relate directly to the overarching dimensions of social activism, development, and characteristics of theater; as well as to the three levels of inquiry (individual, setting, and community). Follow up questions were used to help the participants expound on the main questions. Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes. All interviews took place in a quiet, private conference room at the Mildred Barry Center, in Rockford, IL. This multi-use center is a facility belonging to the Janet Wattles mental health agency. This location was chosen after consulting with the managing director and determining a quiet comfortable location that interview participants had prior familiarity, and where transportation could easily be arranged. Only the interviewer and participant were present during the interviews. The interviews were video-taped and I later transcribed the audio verbatim with some help from a professional transcriptionist. The interviews took place over five separate visits to Rockford. In total, 230 pages of transcribed text were generated for analysis from the interviews. Comments on the interview process can be found below under the heading Individual Interview Process in Chapter V. Interviews were scheduled with participants over the telephone and in person when the researcher attended the troupe’s rehearsal meetings.

Focus Group

Data was also collected from a focus group held with seven troupe members of The Stars of Light on May 15, 2008. The focus group took place at the Mildred Barry Center in the same conference room where the individual interviews took place. The focus group followed a semi-structured, co-facilitated format wherein one researcher facilitated the discussion using prompt
questions, and the other took written notes related to group interactions and issues discussed. The focus group allowed for a) further exploration of the nine domains of interest, b) observation of group relational processes, c) recording of themes related to creative and logistical group processes, and d) exploration of consistencies and inconsistencies with data from individual interviews. The focus group was audio taped and later transcribed for analysis. All written notes taken during the discussion were also later organized and transcribed for analysis. The focus group lasted approximately 110 minutes. The audio transcript and transcribed notes generated 28 pages of text in total. The protocol used in the focus group can be found in Appendix B. Reflections on the focus group process and use of the protocol can be found below under the heading *Focus Group Process* in Chapter V.

**Performance and Archival Data**

Additional secondary sources of data were scripted materials, publicity information, and audio recordings of past performances. The rational for the inclusion of archival and performance information was to help the researchers identify target audiences, repeated topics in performance content, repeated artistic components, and evidence of organizational or community connections and efforts of social activism. Visits in the field to conduct interviews and the focus group were timed, when possible, to coincide with live performances presented by the participating groups. Two performances were videotaped in their entirety during visits to Rockford. As part of the collaborative process working with the troupe’s directors, seven complete scripts of original productions (original 1996 play and 2005-2009 tour shows) were collected, as well as information regarding the troupe’s performance history in the community. In addition, five full audio recordings of previous radio shows, and two documentary videos
about *The Stars of Light* were also collected and reviewed. The archival data collected generated an additional 144 pages of text, 270 minutes of audio, and 175 minutes of video for analysis.

**Field Notes and Observational Data**

A critical component of grounded theory methodology is the use of memos and field notes to supplement and inform the analysis of other data sources. Observational data was used to situate other data sources with an appreciation of the physical setting, operational procedures, social and organizational norms, and other dynamics of the troupe. These notes were recorded during and after all interviews, focus groups, and following performances. Field notes were kept in a journal and later typed to facilitate analysis. “Memos” differ from field notes, in that they were written during the process of coding transcribed data. ATLAS.ti software allowed for easy creation and organization of memos, so that commentary, reactions, and theoretical notes could be attached to specific sections of text. Content, topics addressed, and critical statements were included in field notes by the researcher following the witnessed live performances, and after review of the previous scripts. Table 2.3 below presents the various data sources used in the present study and the type of data that they produced for analysis.

**Procedure**

In May 2008 the managing director of *The Stars of Light* was contacted by phone and email communication, informed of the goals of the project, and invited to participate. It was made clear to the managing director that developing a collaborative relationship from the beginning of the research partnership is a primary goal of the project. She then described the project to the troupe at a regularly scheduled meeting of the troupe. The troupe expressed an interest to participate in the study, and plans were made to proceed with meeting in person and
Table 2.3

Methods of Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Data Type Generated for Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio from individual interviews</td>
<td>- Transcribed verbatim text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio from focus group</td>
<td>- Transcribed verbatim text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video recording of two live performances</td>
<td>- Typed summaries and notes regarding content and process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous performance scripts</td>
<td>- Typed summaries and notes regarding content and issues addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archived audio recordings of radio shows</td>
<td>- Typed summaries and notes regarding content and issues addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary video recordings</td>
<td>- Typed summaries and notes regarding content and issues addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>- Journal entries recording observational data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memos</td>
<td>- Text notes created during coding of transcribed text,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>attached to specific codes and sections of text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

recruitment. Table 2.4 summarizes the activities that took place during the three primary phases of the present research.

The initial phase of the study involved discussing the details of the project with the troupe members and directors, answering questions, and obtaining signed informed consent forms from interested troupe members. See Appendix C for informed consent materials. An initial conference call took place during a regularly scheduled rehearsal in early May 2008, wherein I was able to introduce myself to the troupe and answer initial questions regarding the study design and participation. I first visited Rockford, Illinois in late May 2008 and met with the troupe in person to witness a regular rehearsal and review the informed consent materials with the troupe. This initial visit also involved a tour of the Silver Lining Club, the psychosocial rehabilitation clubhouse run by the Janet Wattles organization where *The Stars of Light* normally meets to rehearse. Contact was made with individual participants in person or by phone to set up detailed plans for individual interviews. Research team members were also recruited in the first
Table 2.4

Procedural Phases and Activities of the Present Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1     | Selection and initial contact with troupe  
- Initial phone conference with entire troupe  
- First visit to Rockford, IL  
- Informed consent obtained and scheduling of interviews and focus group  
- Recruitment and initial meetings with research team  
- Observational data collection of troupe and setting |
| 2     | Data collection: Individual interviews and focus group conducted, text transcripts created from recordings, attended live performances, archival data collected  
- Five separate visits to Rockford, IL  
- Research team meetings held  
- Concurrent data collection and analysis  
- Open, axial, and selective coding procedures |
| 3     | Initial formulation of theoretical constructs from selective coding  
- Member checking with troupe involving presentation of findings and feedback  
- Manuscript preparation |

phase of the study. And initial research team meeting was held to discuss the timeline of the project, data organization software, data analysis plans, and relevant scheduling issues. Data was collected from the initial meeting with the troupe directors and members, in the form of field notes and memos. Given the limited amount of time I was able to spend in Rockford it was critical to record as much as possible about the setting of the Silver Lining Club and the Janet Wattles Center. Observations were noted regarding the troupe’s functioning in the context of the clubhouse, consumer/staff interactions and social setting dynamics, as well as history of the setting and organization as a whole.
The next phase of the study involved finalizing interview schedules with troupe members, conducting the interviews, and transcription of the interviews into text for analysis. In all, I made five separate visits to Rockford, Illinois in order to complete the interviews with troupe members, facilitate the focus group, and to attend live performances from May – October 2009. Four face-to-face research team meetings took place to review data collection methods, address procedural challenges, training in use of ATLAS.ti software, and to designate tasks for data management and analysis. In addition, regular email and phone correspondence took place over between June 2008 and September 2009 to facilitate data analysis after the team was unable to meet in person due to geographical separation. The primary goal of this phase of the study was data collection, transcription of interviews and focus group data, coding, and analysis. Regular telephone and email contacts were also made with the troupe’s managing and artistic directors to give updates and get feedback about the process of data collection. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, the data collection and analysis process was reflexive and concurrent. That is field notes, initial open coding of text, and research team input informed and enhanced the continued interview process and collection of archival data.

The third phase of the project involved writing up initial results, including formulation of theoretical constructs, member checking, and final manuscript preparation. In October 2009 I met with the entire troupe for the purpose of member checking; relaying relevant themes that emerge from the data, and to get feedback regarding communicability and coherence. Details and reflections regarding the process of the various phases of the study are found below.

Data Management

All interviews were recorded using a digital video camera. Following the interview the audio portion of the recording was transferred to a computer and transcribed verbatim, creating
de-identified electronic text files. The focus group was audio taped, and later transcribed in the same fashion. All digital videocassettes and audio tapes were kept in a locked filling cabinet, along with all other personal identification of study participants. This includes secured flash drives with digital text. Personal participant information was removed during the process of transcription of interviews, and coders analyzed de-identified text. The entire data set of transcribed interviews and the focus group constituted 252 pages of text for analysis. The computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) ATLAS.ti was used to assist in the organization, management, and coding of the data collected from interviews, archival information, the focus group, and field notes. This software is specifically designed for use in research using a grounded theory methodology.
CHAPTER III. DATA ANALYSIS

Coding Procedures

Data analysis followed the structure and methods of grounded theory. However, methods were expanded to incorporate the coding of data from all three data sources. The general structure of hierarchical coding began with open coding, moved to axial coding, and then to selective coding and articulation of theoretical constructs. The process of data analysis was more cyclical than linear, though the coding procedures are hierarchical in nature. That is, using the articulation of Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), as repeating ideas were pulled from the relevant text of each transcript, they are compared to repeating themes from other interview and focus group transcripts, and archival data. This method of “constant comparison” is used at the levels of open, axial, and selective coding.

In order to saturate the various domains of interest starting at the first open coding stage collaborative coding was used in the present research. This means research team members coded raw text individually; then I reviewed and compared the relevant text and repeated ideas identified by each coder. Interview transcripts were randomly assigned to members of the research team in order for multiple coders to highlight what they independently felt was relevant portions of the text data. A matrix was set up for the purposes of assigning transcripts and ensuring that I and at least one other person coded each interview and focus group. Transcripts were assigned depending on research team members’ availability. Multiple coders also allowed for a check of inter rater reliability. All team members used the ATLAS.it software in the open coding process. Due to geographical separation the team was unable to meet in person during much of the data analysis phase, however electronic and phone communication allowed for some discussion of similarities and differences in coding. As individual research team members coded
transcripts they created memos regarding their rational for choosing and grouping narrative data, as well as comments on the interaction between the participants and myself. This was done to ensure that the analytic process was made as transparent as possible and to inform my reflexive journaling on my biases during the process. For those unfamiliar with computer assisted qualitative data analysis software such as ATLAS.ti, it is important to clarify that these programs do not automatically find relevant text, build theoretical modals for the researcher, or in any way identify confirmatory or disconfirmatory evidence from the data. However the program does act as an efficient tool for organizing sections of text and building larger code families and “trees” as analysis continues and repeated ideas and themes emerge. Table 3.1 presents the purposes and activities involved in the various stages of the coding process.

**Rigor and Trustworthiness**

As addressed above in Chapter I, assessing the quality of qualitative research methods requires different criteria than the standard assessment of reliability and validity involved in quantitative research. However, in addition to using the structured, established methodology of grounded theory in the present study, extensive efforts were involved in the study to increase rigor and trustworthiness. Morrow, Rakhsha & Castañeda (2001) identify several standards of trustworthiness in qualitative research and outline a list of quality criteria. Table 3.2 presents these quality criteria along with a description of how each was met in the process of the present study. One of the primary elements of the research design to enhance rigor was to include data from the lived experience of the actors themselves, rather than simply collect archival data and glean information about the troupe from the directors. The inclusion of participant/consumer voices is designed to enhance the verisimilitude and coherence of the findings.
### Table 3.1

#### Stages of Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open Coding</td>
<td>- Identify relevant ideas from primary data sources</td>
<td>- Initial review of transcribed text from interviews and focus group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Highlight key quotes, ideas, topics</td>
<td>- Creation of 4852 codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Creation of memos that comment on text and coding process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Use of multiple coders for each text source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axial Coding</td>
<td>- Comparison among data, incidents, and concepts to construct meaning from groups of data</td>
<td>- Initial codes are grouped into broader “repeating ideas”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Integration of various data sources</td>
<td>- Data from archival video and audio materials and field notes compared to, and integrated with, repeating ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 69 initial thematic categories identified along axes: topics of interest and level of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective Coding</td>
<td>- Selection of core themes and relating them to one another</td>
<td>- Initial themes compared to one another, field notes and memos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Patterns of interaction and causations identified</td>
<td>- Three primary topics of interest maintained in developing broader constructs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Development of larger integrative constructs based on axial coding</td>
<td>- 69 initial themes reformulated into 18 theoretical constructs supported by 67 themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3.2

**Quality Criteria Fulfilled in Present Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Criterion</th>
<th>Activities to Meet Criterion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immersion in the field</td>
<td>Researcher has extensive experience with people with severe mental illness. Several site visits made to conduct in-depth interviews and collect observational data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient data</td>
<td>Interviews conducted with all off the active troupe members, two past members, and both directors. Focus group, observational data, and field notes collected to expand data pool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Multiple data collection methods used, multiple coders used to crosscheck and saturate codes from transcripts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immersion in the data</td>
<td>Ongoing process beginning with first contact with troupe. Immersion enhanced by researching acting as interview transcriber, primary coder, and primary contact with participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant checks</td>
<td>Member checking took place with entire troupe during follow-up meeting. Participants offered a chance to review finding and offer input.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for disconfirming evidence</td>
<td>As coding and thematic analysis continued, disconfirming evidence was continually sought. Member checking, comparison between multiple coders, and comparison between interview data, focus group data, field notes, and memos were all used to search for evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of researcher subjectivity</td>
<td>A self-reflexive journal was maintained through the study to monitor researcher bias, assumptions, and emotions involved in data collection and analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing power and privilege</td>
<td>Participant voices have been intentionally privileged, since mental health consumer voices are historically under-represented in psychological research. Power shared with clients via collaboration, acting as audience to performances, and through member checking.</td>
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Open Coding

The first phase of coding involved line-by-line review of each interview transcript and the focus group transcript (258 pages total). Open codes took the form of words, sentences, or larger sections of text that seemed relevant to the coder. The three central domains of interest: a) developmental processes of individuals and the troupe, b) social activism, and c) characteristics of theater were used as a guide for coders to identify relevant text. Open codes often consisted of the exact words of the participant. When verbatim responses were not selected, a code was created to mirror the expression of the participant as closely and succinctly as possible. Due to the rich nature of the narrative data, the same section of text was often assigned several codes. The open coding process is designed to cast as wide and fine a net as possible over the data. When quotations from the text inspired a broader commentary on a certain theme or topic, memos were created attached to the relevant section of text.

Although they have not self-identified as consumers of mental health services, or living with psychiatric disabilities, the managing director and artistic director have both performed with the other troupe members on a regular basis. Therefore, their views, experiences, and insights are considered as equally important in the coding process. From the 11 individual interviews and focus group transcripts myself and the other research team members created 4852 individual codes. However many of these codes were used multiple times, as the topics and ideas were brought up repeatedly in the transcripts.
Axial Coding

The next phase of analysis involved the grouping of the open codes into broader categories, or repeating ideas. This phase of coding marks a shift from working with the raw text directly, to bringing together common themes and ideas repeated by and among participants.

This higher order coding entails constant comparison among data, incidents, and concepts with the attempt to construct meaning from groups of data (Charmaz, 2004; Highlen & Finley, 1996). Here, memos, field notes, archival data, and observational data are brought together to begin identifying thematic constructs that can be used to build larger theoretical assertions. After review and sorting of the 4852 codes created in the open coding phase, significant “repeating ideas” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) emerged from the data. Although no a priori structure for the number or exact content of the repeating ideas was used, the overarching scaffold of nine domains of interest was used to situate the emerging ideas. Figure 3.1 below represents these domains. The process of creating the repeating idea categories involved grouping and regrouping codes together around common ideas. Repeating ideas were then grouped into higher order categories, or themes. Examples of emergent thematic categories within the domain of Developmental Processes/Setting Level include: Facilitator Roles, Script Development, Employment and Involvement, Dropping Out, and Mutual Support. Examples of emergent thematic categories within the domain of Social Activism – Community-level include: Targeting Audiences/Shaping Content, Audience Factors, Accessing Community Impact, and Inspiring Audiences to Get Mental Health Assistance. Numbers in the cells of Figure 3.1 represent the total number of thematic categories that initially emerged in each of the nine domains of interest.
As axial coding progressed, the overlapping nature of the three original topics of interest became clear. For example, in addressing developmental processes of the troupe, participants at times simultaneously addressed specific characteristics of the troupe’s theatrical elements. This overlap in the data occurred across all three topics of interest. In order to best saturate all the emergent thematic categories, individual codes and repeating ideas were at times placed under multiple categories. In this way, the thematic categories are not entirely orthogonal. This choice was made during the axial coding process in order to best inform higher-order constructs and preserve the complex nature of the troupe’s collective narrative.

During axial coding, the troupe’s written scripts, audio recordings of their radio show broadcasts, and live performance recordings were also analyzed for content and relevant themes to the three central topics of interest. These data sources were not analyzed using the same
detailed coding procedure as the interview and focus group data. However, in order to glean critical information summaries and memos were written regarding elements such as: specific topics addressed, the nature of the content (e.g. humorous, serious, fictional, autobiographical, etc), elements of the flow of the performance and the talk back process, information covered about mental illness, discussions of the Janet Wattles Center, the repetition of skits across time and scripts, other community groups and organizations mentioned, and the role of facilitators.

The following is an excerpt from a summary of one of the troupe’s previous scripts,

The script focuses a great deal on positivity and using humor to point out very real ways that stigma manifests in the workplace. The one formal song by [troupe member] is used throughout, as an artistic thread. In this same way, casual and realistic conversations, and the scenes of stigma are used repeatedly. The forth section of the play employs a more impressionistic and poetic style, using simple instrument sounds as a voice. These various pieces are woven together, as if flipping between channels. Hospitalization and treatment are discussed in terms of individual experiences, rather than any broader commentary. There is a gentleness and sincerity to the play. The theme of the "bus" is used to frame the play, but not as a developed storyline or thoroughly extended metaphor. Terminology and slang related to mental illness is used in a ““tongue in cheek” manor, sending the message “we're going to talk about serious things, but we do it playfully.”

*Selective Coding*

The selective coding process involved a further analysis and re-grouping of thematic categories from the data. This aspect of grounded theory involves the process of selecting core themes and relating them to one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved integrating themes, refining categories and incorporating elements of the archival and observational data.
Here, relationships between themes were examined for patterns of causation or interaction. A shift occurred during this portion of the analytical process as constructs emerged from the data that blended and joined elements of the individual, troupe, and community levels of analysis. However, the axial structure relating data to the three central topics of interest continued to maintain explanatory utility, to the degree that the theoretical narrative presented below maintains this basic structure.

This coding process is “selective” in that the researcher’s extensive connection and exposure to the data after open and axial stages of coding allow for fluid integration of various data sources. Within the myriad ideas and themes in the data, constructs are articulated that select out the elements of data that best offer illumination of the research questions. Selective coding in the present study involved a large amount of comparison of emergent themes to field notes and memos created by myself and the other coders. This comparison allowed for a critique and re-examination of themes. Another type of comparison in this stage involved juxtaposing focus group and interview data with the content and formats of archived scripts. This comparison allowed for a richer examination of such issues as the similarities and differences between the actors discussion of the troupe’s activities on stage, and the actual content of the performances. Radio show content was also compared to the organizational community connections discussed in the narrative data. In addition, the selective coding process involved a review of how critical incidents, skits, and opinions were shared in the focus group compared to the individual interviews.

A crucial part of the selective coding process in the present study involved integrating feedback from *The Stars of Light*. As theoretical constructs were identified from the analytic process, they were presented to the troupe to review and make comments. This “member
checking” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was done to check the coherence, face validity, and verisimilitude of the constructs. For the purposes of this study, coherence is defined as the extent to which the constructs and themes fit together and tell a coherent story about the lived experiences of the participants. Verisimilitude is defined as the extent to which the themes generated through the research process accurately depict or represent the actual lived experience of the participants. Feedback from the troupe was used to further hone the emergent theoretical constructs. The member checking process is described in more detail below in chapter V.
CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

The following chapter presents the cumulative findings from all stages of coding and data analysis. Findings are presented as a “theoretical narrative” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, pg. 40) incorporating the emergent theoretical constructs resultant from the data analysis. Emergent constructs are reported around the framework of the three central topics of interest: social activism, developmental processes, and characteristics of theater. Quantitative data collected regarding the history of The Stars of Light’s activities and performances are presented above, within chapter 2. Although a good deal of data about the troupe’s development, history and activities are incorporated into the theoretical narrative, this quantitative data is presented to help the reader situate the qualitative findings and scope of community contacts.

Theoretical Narrative

The following is a cumulative theoretical narrative systematically addressing the three central domains of interest of the present study: developmental processes, social activism, and characteristics of theater. Constructs are explicitly linked to thematic categories, which are linked to relevant repeating ideas from the data, which in turn are linked to examples from the raw text. The structure of the theoretical narrative is presented as such to elucidate the hierarchical coding process and emphasize the direct linkages between exemplar quotes from participants and the larger theoretical findings. In order to assist the reader, under each theoretical construct (bolded and italicized), bolded text is used to identify the themes that support the construct, then italicized text is used to identify the repeated ideas that support those themes. Finally, quoted raw text is included to elucidate the repeated ideas.
Developmental Processes

The developmental processes that the participants experienced personally during involvement with the troupe tended to blend with the structure and development of the troupe’s activities. Both these individual and setting level process were also heavily influenced by characteristics of the theatrical activities of the troupe. Theoretical constructs emerged from the data that highlight these cross-domain interactions. Table 4.1 below lists these constructs and their composite themes, which will be presented in the following theoretical narrative.

Stability of Form Helps Flexibility of Involvement. This emergent construct links processes in structure and functioning of the troupe over time with processes of individual involvement. The general structure of the troupe has remained relatively stable since it was established in 1995, while the membership has remained in constant flux from year to year. Many members have remained involved for several years however, and the stable structure of the troupe allows for members to leave and re-join smoothly. The participants addressed this larger issue in several ways.

One common theme discussed was the ways in which symptoms of mental illness can influence involvement over time. This theme was comprised of ideas such as how symptoms can limit involvement,

That’s why I said at the performance yesterday you know, had this been Tuesday I might not be here, because Tuesday was a very bad day for me. It’s not all peaches and cream even when you learn how to cope with the illness. (7:93)

and how individual member factors influence desire for involvement,
Table 4.1
Theoretical Constructs and Themes Related to Developmental Processes

I. Stability of Form Helps Flexibility of Involvement
   a. Symptoms of mental illness can influence involvement over time
   b. Personal history of troupe involvement varies
   c. The troupe is inclusive and open to flexibility of involvement
   d. The processes involved in rehearsal and performance

II. Troupe Flexibility Enhances Sustainability and Personal Growth
   a. Participation impacts personal growth
   b. Importance of directors’ roles
   c. The rehearsal and production process is flexible
   d. Adjustments are made to keep the troupe going
   e. Employment and troupe involvement

III. Personal Gains are Carried Beyond the Troupe Setting
   a. Increased acceptance of challenges related to self and others
   b. Increased confidence
   c. Development of identity and sense of self
   d. Discovering and developing skills and talents
   e. Decreasing social fear and isolation

IV. Support and Dependency with Janet Wattles Center
   a. Ideological support
   b. Financial and logistical support
   c. Symbiotic relationship
   d. Mixed feelings about troupe independence
   e. Challenges to the partnership

V. Multifaceted Relationships with Community Organizations
   a. Performance is the primary, but not only, form of partnership
   b. Organizational networks grow sporadically
   c. Tailoring performance content leads to new organizational ties
   d. Sharing the troupe model

VI. Ideas for Future Directions
   a. Expanded roles and responsibilities for troupe members
   b. Enhanced representation of schizophrenia
   c. New topics and audiences
   d. Developing independence from Janet Wattles
   e. Desire for more recruitment and publicity
Yeah, for whatever reason they just, at that particular time they are not in a good frame of mind or – they get more, I don’t know, if courage is the word, or they get more, hmm, they just think they can handle it more maybe. (11:355)

The participants also highlighted how their own personal history of troupe involvement varies as they explained the relationship between the stability and flexibility within the troupe. They shared their experience of coming back to the troupe within this theme:

Being part of the group season after season gives you a chance to come back to something that you know from the first couple of experiences with the Troupe that everything is okay where you’re at, you’re safe. There are people there that know you and know how you are and know how to talk to you, know what buttons to push to keep you on track, know what buttons not to push to upset you. (5:010)

Length of involvement varied among the participants from only one tour season to eight years. All of the participants who have been a part of the troupe for several years reported some period of taking a break from the troupe, in addition to the regular break in activities the troupe takes between the Spring and Fall tour seasons. As highlighted in the quote above, troupe members repeatedly discussed the comfort they felt knowing what to expect when they returned to the troupe after a break.

Another theme addressed by the participants relating to the construct “Stability of Form helps Flexibility of Involvement” is that the troupe is inclusive and open to flexibility of involvement. This theme was explained through such repeating ideas as flexibility to various levels of involvement is a troupe strength,
I think that’s another point that some of us might only be able to go to, out of six shows in a season, maybe we only go to two. Well, that’s fine, too. I think that’s really great because a lot of organizations…you can’t do this. (2:072)

and the troupe *making adjustments to manage actors not being able to perform*,

They’ve been doing it for such a long time that they try to find out ahead of time who’s going to be where, but like, for instance, me. I, among other things, I have Attention Deficit and sometimes I’ll have things on my calendar that I don’t even look at and, about three days from the last performance, I called up [the artistic director]….And he had all these plans for me to drive and this, that, and the other thing, and I felt really bad. But yet, they made adjustments. (2:002)

Another repeating idea the troupe discussed was that the troupe has an *open door policy* for welcoming past troupe members back,

We always have open arms and open doors where they can come back in. And so, it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re coming back in because their illnesses kick back in. I mean they can come back in anytime no matter where they’re at. In whatever circumstances. (12:169)

The participants also reflected on *the processes involved in rehearsal and performance* as another theme related to “Stability of Form helps Flexibility of Involvement.” They described the overall structure of rehearsal, preparation, and planning as remaining very stable over the course of their involvement as part of a *common rehearsal process*:

We’ll get together and read through. And kind of ask everybody what commitment they’re willing to make, time-wise. And then we’ll start reading it, and…. and then before we go somewhere we usually have a run through and we’ll talk about where we’re going to go and what arrangements we need to make. (10:126)
In addition, the troupe members shared that there is *stability over time in performance format*:

But for the most part, the format is pretty much the way it’s always been. Its humor, pretty much that’s the way it’s always been. Most of its humor but there’s little bit of information interlaced between the humor parts. (11:391)

*Troupe Flexibility Enhances Sustainability and Personal Growth.* This construct also emerged from components of individual and troupe development, and draws in elements related to theatrical activities and their flexibility. In contrast to the above discussion of stability, this construct helps explain how flexibility of the troupe’s casting and creation process allows for members to come and go, which in turn helps facilitate personal recovery progresses and growth. This flexibility also allows for the incorporation of members personal stories, ideas, skits, music, and other talents into the troupe’s activities.

One of the themes that all the participants discussed at some length relates to the ways in which *participation impacts personal growth.* This theme has several sub-themes that comprise it, and participants discussed several of these in relationship to the troupe setting’s flexibility and acceptance of them. The sub-theme regarding members growing in acceptance was highlighted with such repeating ideas as *accepting mistakes and failures,*

How they feel so comfortable with using their talents regardless of how good they are, they get to allow themselves to mess up, it’s like you don’t have that—I don’t have panic attacks like I used to. (1:018)

As well as *managing disappointments in the troupe setting as growth,*

I’m probably not in as many skits as I was…last season, I was singing the song, but I have to kind of catch myself and go, “Hey! You’re still a very important part of this. Don’t mess it up
for yourself by throwing a temper tantrum.” I mean, I’ve done a lot of that in my life with
other things, jobs included, so I think that’s it. (2:151)

Another sub-theme discussing troupe participation and growth process relates to participants
building confidence through involvement. Specifically, several members discussed confidence
taking on different characters,

Because for me, it’s kind of exciting to have a part I haven’t had all season. So it just makes
my brain start going to see how I’m going to make that character different than the other
characters I am playing…And that is confidence-building thing that happens as well. (12:165)

In addition, troupe members described another sub-theme explaining how involvement has
helped them develop social skills and hope for their future,

It’s a challenge like anything else and being in the troupe makes me hopeful, makes me laugh,
it helps me communicate better with other people. There’s such a variety of personalities in
the troupe. It’s a very affective way of growing, and it’s not overwhelming. (7:093)

The troupe members also identified skills development related to working better on a team with
others, building acting and public speaking skills, as well as improvements in self-monitoring.

Participants described another sub-theme explaining personal growth regarding feeling a
decrease in fear and social isolation. They spoke of such ideas as not taking rehearsal too
seriously helps getting out of your shell,

Well, a lot of times when we’re rehearsing we’re making jokes and stuff and that’s part of,
that’s part of getting out of your shell because we don’t take it that seriously. I don’t think
anybody really does, it’s just kind of fun to do it. (11:031)
Personal growth processes will be discussed further below in regard to the ways in which personal gains have carried forward into other facets of participants’ lives. A closer look now at the factors that influence the sustainability of *The Stars of Light* may help further clarify the ways in which the individual and troupe levels of analysis overlap.

One primary anchor for the troupe’s sustainability over time seems to be the two directors’ ongoing commitment to the troupe since 1995, along with their flexibility to meet members where they are in terms of strengths, interests and abilities. Their multiple roles will be discussed below in more detail, however the their commitment and openness to changing membership over time seem to have played a role in creating a setting where those with psychiatric disabilities can thrive and grow. The participants discussed this theme of the importance of directors’ roles in several ways. They described one element of this theme in regards to the ways in which the facilitators consistently assess the individual interest, motivation and capabilities of troupe members,

That’s pretty amazing that you’re able to pick things up and Steve is able to meet with people and find out what they’re interested in and what they’re capable of doing and doesn’t want to, on one hand, put too much pressure on them, but understanding that this is also kind of a personal, therapeutic value. I think he really does a good job with that as well. (2:039)

The participants repeatedly described another idea regarding the directors’ activities and roles. This idea describes the directors’ sensitivity and attention to troupe members, specifically their keen eye for symptoms and difficulties,

They are very keen to notice when somebody is even just a little symptomatic….I can see when somebody is having a hard time, I can see in his [artistic director] eyes that he picks it up very quickly. So it really is a sort of family for us. All of us. But maybe especially for
those of us that don’t have the sort of support that would enable us to grow, and learn how to cope with our systems. (7:007)

Here we see how the troupe members compare the sensitivities of the directors to that of a “family” member, and the ways in which this supports personal growth. Another participant described the family atmosphere of the setting in the context of the sustaining power troupe involvement had on her life,

But from that point on I just kept going. And that was the one thing I got up and did every week. So It was that one thing that just kept me going from week to week, because basically I wasn’t working and I was hibernating. And then I guess once I felt comfortable I was like yeah, I want to be part of The Stars of Light….Its nice because you get to do things you don’t normally do. And you get together with a group of people where you have lots of things in common. So kind of like a, to me its like another family. (6:013)

During the focus group, the family comparison was also made,

Then when I joined the Stars I think it became more of like a family – it was a support system that I didn’t normally have. And it was with people who understood where I was coming from and what I was going through. It was just a camaraderie where we could talk about, just issues or medication, like “how’d that work for you?” things like that. And just the people in the Stars of Light became basically a big huge family. And at times, as in any family, people will come and go, and stuff like that. (12:005)

Troupe members also spoke a great deal about the ways in which the rehearsal and production process is flexible, and how the troupe’s activities harness this flexibility to sustain the troupe and help members thrive in the troupe. Participants repeated commented on the manageable yet effective length of the performance structure, and how that helps keep the troupe
adjust to shifting membership, “we have a 30-minute show. We can read our scripts and the
Troupe doesn’t have to be so big. We’re talking 8-to-10 people can pull off a tour show.” (4:340)

In addition to the length of the performance, aspects of the production process also allow
for adjustment to members capabilities. For example, the participants repeated brought up the
fact that adjustments are made to manage memory problems. The managing director described it
in this way,

I think the standard is that, yeah, they’re not professional actors. Half of them aren’t going to
memorize their roles. We figure out some creative way that if they need to have something,
whether it’s a book or a clipboard or a music stand that they can refer back to it. Some of it is
their nervousness; some of it is their illness. They have memory problems. I have memory
problems memorizing roles. (4:326)

However, participants also highlighted the importance of finding a balance between flexibility
and structure,

When I think it’s only flexibility and then I forget structure, there’s trouble. And when’s its
only structure and we forget to be flexible, then that’s trouble. So it’s always balance, I mean,
it’s kind of like theatre in that sense, too, is that I maintain, for myself anyway, that both
things have to be true. There’s nothing more important in the world than that show you’re
doing right now and how good you can make it, and there’s nothing less important in the
world….because if everything is so important then you’ll end up falling and hurting yourself
emotionally. You know what I mean? But if you also maintain that sense of humor, like, “I
gave it my best shot.” I gave it my absolute best shot and this is where we landed. That’s
okay. Then you find that sense of balance. (3:115)
In addition, troupe members repeatedly commented on the *flexibility and cooperation involved in performance process*,

But we don’t always have, if we’re doing a specific show, we don’t have enough. So. That’s where flexibility and cooperation, that’s where it really gets involved. It was kind of funny, because, [the managing director] and I have somewhat of a personality type of just, everything’s got to be in it’s place; so I was always in charge of the lavalieres [cordless microphones], and who got it when, and what numbers, and stuff like that, and then I had to sit and think, ok, this person doesn’t really understand the concept, they’re just with it all the time. Or it’s like, “ok you have it then you give it to this person, but you’re getting it back” kind of thing. Cause, that was something to be worked around and stuff like that. So. I think for me I had to couch a few and say ‘ok this is what’s gotta happen’ kind of thing, just to reassure people. (6:207)

Troupe members also discussed on the ways the troupe is able to *go with the flow* regarding shifting emotional and psychological struggles of the members,

We do a lot of interaction. I think that we just go with the flow with whatever happens. Everybody’s been pretty consistent. There have been people who have had bad days, which would take me back, I mean, they would usually be in an upbeat mood and, all of a sudden, they’re not, so it’s like, “Wow! I’m not alone. They could have bad days, too.” And so, it’s like working around everybody’s—whatever problem they have—and seeing how they handle it and then how people come together to try to help that person out of their bad day. That, I think it makes the group stronger. (1:108)
The accepting and inclusive nature of the troupe setting was also described as a place where *it’s ok to make mistakes,*

To me, just the joy of doing the show and, even if somebody screws up or, I mean, I make a mistake, we just laugh it off. We know that we’re not professionals. I mean, I’ve seen [the artistic director] make some real goofs, especially when he makes one, it’s just hilarious and we really give it to him about it, you know, when it happens. Again, that’s just this is not life or death. If anything, we’re going to make it fun, and by making it fun we’re going to be a lot more successful. We have some folks in the group that are still on a real delicate situation with their illness and where they are in their life. And so, there’s no reason for anybody to feel stressed out. There just isn’t. (2:144)

Another way in which members described the flexibility of the troupe facilitating personal involvement and growth relates to the *troupe’s openness to incorporate a variety of members’ talents.* For example, one member regularly uses music to help convey his personal story during performance,

Well my songs that I’ve written are mostly autobiographical and especially the first one that I wrote was really autobiographical. And so I guess I did think of myself as trying to let everybody know what I’ve gone through. (10:054)

Somewhat related to this ideas is the repeating idea shared by the members that the troupe is *flexible in choosing artistic activities* used to rehearse and develop new material for performances. The artistic director of the troupe describes it in this way,

So, you know, I’ve tried, for instance, the other week, I thought, well, wouldn’t it be fun–I think I saw something on TV, someone was conducting an orchestra and I thought, ‘What a fund thing to do. Let’s do that.’ Because it’s really a direction of energy. It’s really a
different--you’re trying different energy pools. Some, you know, as a warm-up exercise. I thought, ‘If it fails, it fails. That’s okay. We’ve got a good relationship in there. They’re used to be doing things that don’t work that are weird.’ I bought a conductor’s baton and selection, I think, a Susa March that we all knew because it’s best if you know the music. And then they had to conduct. (3:025)

The emergent construct “Troupe Flexibility Enhances Sustainability and Personal Growth” was also supported by themes in the data related to way that adjustments are made to keep the troupe going. Members explained this in relation to sharing roles to sustain the troupe, Like I said, someday maybe we won’t be doing this but we don’t want it to die. We want to know that it will still live on. No one should be so important that when they leave, it doesn’t keep going. (4:336)

A closely related idea that participants discussed regards membership changing seasonally, “it changes seasonally…People go and come” (9:067), and the troupe adjusting to people dropping out,

There’s a lot of pressure on the people who are in it because then they got to take on extra roles. In order for a troupe to really survive, there’s got to be that continuous group. You can’t have people dropping out without someone coming and taking their place. And so, that’s a kind of a scary thought. You know, how can a troupe survive when people are going to be quitting or they can’t make it? So that, for me, that seemed like a problem as far as interacting. (1:110)

This quote also emphasizes the fact that making adjustments in the troupe setting can be stressful at times. However, the data supports the idea that the longer a troupe member is involved in the troupe the more exposure she/he has to drop out and shifting membership. This accumulated
experience seems to lessen the concerns expressed in the above quote. The participant quoted above had only been with the troupe for one tour season at the time of the interview. Many participants who have been involved with the troupe for several years discussed the ways that *troupe dynamics change with troupe membership* and that this can relate to differences in psychological functioning.

Yeah, because it’s been different people. The troupe gets such a variety of people. And the variety being their mental capacity, um, the severity of their mental illness, or where they’re at in regards to their mental illness. It’s kind of weird because the dynamics change quite a bit. Some of them, some of us have been like the solid core to it, and then others would come in. And I think that having a solid four or five, and then being able to bring in others where we’re able to adjust to them, and help them adjust. (6:187)

This quote also highlights the repeated idea that troupe members with a longer history with the troupe help new members adjust and learn the norms of the troupe setting.

Troupe members repeatedly addressed the relationship between **employment and troupe involvement**. This theme was found to relate to the construct “Troupe Flexibility Enhances Sustainability and Personal Growth” with some complexity. Troupe sustainability relays on members volunteering their time. However, the troupe’s rehearsal and performance schedule conflicts with members work schedule at times, and several members shared their story of having to leave the troupe for a period in order to manage the time and emotional requirements of a job. Another factor however is that the troupe’s activities seem to have helped many members find purpose, personal growth, and offer a meaningful activity in times when their illness and other life circumstances did not allow them to maintain employment. In addition, other participants explained that they were able to find a balance where they work part-time and
still devote time to troupe participation. The repeating idea of balancing employment and involvement has manifest different developmental trajectories and involvement patterns across troupe members. One participant who has been with the troupe since 2002 described her experience this way,

I did all the tour shows, and everything all the way around. And as I slowly progressed, I was also slowly starting to get back in the work force which was really hard because I mean I was working full time but I was working where I was working 60-80 hrs a week and, I always worked, and never not, and I just thought that’s what you needed to do to be a contributing member of society. And I was very frustrated because I couldn’t work. Or I couldn’t work in a stable hourly kind of thing. So the Stars gave me some of the stability to be able to do more and try more things. I work now. It’s taken 7 years to get back to full-time. And during that time frame I was pretty much involved with The Stars of Light until pretty much last year. Because I had two jobs but they were both part-time. So I really didn’t have time for The Stars of Light. And now my schedule, I’m working full-time that I started in January and, it depends on when the show is when I can participate. (6:017)

Troupe members also described the ways in which working for Janet Wattles facilitates involvement, “the fact that several of us work for Janet Wattles makes it possible for us to be involved” (2:069). The consensus of participants was that the agency was able to set up supported, or at least supportive, employment opportunities that allow for flexibility around mental health problems. One participant who works as a peer support and employment counselor for Janet Wattles described his experience this way,

I’m in a perfect situation for me. I can go to my boss and say, “Hey, I’m really having a tough week. If you see me getting kind of out of line or grouchy or something, just pull me into your
office [and let me know]” You know? And that’s fine. I like people being totally honest with me and all that. Now, to be honest with you, I couldn’t do that with most of my employers and that included mostly social service agencies some of which were based on Christian principles, for example. It just amazed me how people that were so close to the social services or even, in some cases, people in the mental health field themselves, you know, we say one of the truths is that mental health professionals sometimes are the biggest detriment to people with mental illnesses getting jobs because we automatically say, “Oh, God, this person’s never going to get a job.” We, hopefully, prove that wrong every day. (2:111)

The flexibility and support offered in employment opportunities for persons with psychiatric disabilities at Janet Wattles seems to work in concert with the support agency managers have for the work of the troupe. This was clarified several times when participants employed by the agency described experiences when managers adjusted their schedules to accommodate troupe rehearsals and performances.

**Personal Gains are Carried Beyond the Troupe Setting:** Participants repeatedly described a wide array of personal skills, strengths, and positive psychological benefits of involvement. The following themes are the most significant to emerge from the data: a) increased acceptance of challenges related to self and others, b) increased confidence c) development of identity/sense of self, d) discovering and developing skills and talents, and e) decreasing fear and social isolation. The troupe members discussed the ways in which these impacts and gains have helped them thrive in settings and relationships outside of the troupe. Several repeating ideas arise from the shared experiences of the participants in regards to and increased acceptance of challenges related to self and others. Participants discussed ways that
involvement has increased their acceptance and solidarity with others living with mental illness.

They discussed this in terms of struggling with symptoms,

The therapy behind it. How it helps you realize that having a mental illness is okay. It can be accepted. You don’t have to feel like you’re the only one in the world to have a bad day or want to, you know, slam a plate into the wall because people have mood disorders and they tend to become excited, then that excitement comes into agitation, and then it comes into destructive. (5:164)

as well as how mutual acceptance within the troupe can impact their overall view of others,

And seeing everybody smiling and laughing and that we’re all doing something together. We’re all the same, we all have the same—we all have an illness, you know, and we can all relate to each other and not have to talk about it all the time. You can crack jokes about it all the time because it’s funny. We’re all dealing with our own thing in our own way. (5:169)

Participants also shared how this increased acceptance relates to stigmatization of others with psychiatric disabilities,

I didn’t want to do it at first because, at the time, I was like, “Man! I don’t want to be around these people. I don’t want anything to do with them.” Because I was kind of stigmatized myself. Once I got well and saw how sick some of these people were, I was so repulsed because it was such a bad thing, you know, it was bad to me and it was bad to other people that I didn’t want to be around people with it, but I got involved in it. I’m completely overjoyed that I was involved with some of the people that I was involved with. They’re great actors, great people, you know, I mean, just everyday people but they could make—I mean, they made a difference in my life me just knowing them for that short period of time. (5:104)
Increased acceptance and appreciation of oneself is another repeating idea under this theme. Participants felt this developed during involvement in terms of identity,

It’s made me progress into the person I am today. It has been a very positive experience and I can’t think of anything negative to take away from it. And it’s made me be able to accept who I am. And realize that I am a person, as opposed to associating my identity with different types of things. (12:377)

and acceptance of one’s illness. Developing better acceptance of self was discussed at times in relation to self-stigmatization,

Part of me was kind of hypocritical because here we are trying to de-stigmatize, it was ok to do it in that forum, but then to do it in my life it wouldn’t happen. Cause of the stigma that’s involved. But it’s kind of funny because now I could care less, and at work we talk about it once in awhile, and I’m like, “Hey I’m a mentally ill person. You can call me ‘nuts,’ I don’t care.”…So I’ve slowly started to reverse that process and just embrace the fact that this is life, and I just need to let people know that its ok, and I’m mentally ill and not to shy away from it, or avoid the topic or the situation. (12:049)

Participants shared how they have become less judgmental of themselves as well, “One is you knock of the judge monkey that’s always sitting there chattering at you.” (4:025)

In other words, you do this in a way that you don’t condemn yourself for making mistakes, you learn forgiveness for that; that it’s not the end of the world. You learn how to balance which is important. (4:069)

Troupe members have also noticed increased confidence developing during their involvement in the troupe, and how this confidence has carried over into other areas of their life. They repeatedly shared the ways they have seen increased confidence impact their roles and
relationships outside of the troupe, “I think it’s made me more confident outside it as well. I mean I’ve taken it with me as opposed to leaving it and leaving that and doing something else” (6:037).

Actually it has because - in my personal life, actually I play a lot of pool. So I’m a pool player. And this learning confidence and being able to do things it helps me, it helps me in that area too. So. I believe in myself a little more in other areas. (8:044)

I think about how I got nervous, how I started to sweat, how I started to lose my voice, but I did it and I got through it. Everybody liked it. There was evidence that they liked it. They smiled or clapped or whatever. And I did what I had to do. I overcame my fear and, now, when it comes to something like getting a job or being in a relationship or being a better son or a better brother in my family or whatever, I can do that better now because of how I’ve overcome being on stage. Most people are afraid of being in front of people like that, you know, and I did it then so I could do things even better now. It’s helped. It has. (5:156)

Because it’s given me a lot of confidence. So its like “ok maybe I can do this. If I can do this maybe I can do this.” So it kind of helps get the balls rolling I guess. (8:388)

Another theme shared by the troupe underlying the construct **Personal Gains are Carried Beyond the Troupe Setting** relates to the ways that involvement has impacted the members’ development of their identity and their sense of self. Participants shared this in regards to an enhanced sense of purpose,

Every season of *The Stars of Light* reminds me that there’s purpose in life and if this is the one I want to choose then this is a way for me to get there and I do believe this is what I’m supposed to do, I believe I’m supposed to be a part of opening eyes about this. (7:139)
One thing you mentioned is purpose—it’s kind of cool to be in an acting group and to things with the acting group, and perform. And it’s kind of like status almost. Like you want to have something to define yourself and I think it kind of contributes to that, at least it does for me. (12:043)
as well as incorporating a deeper sense of self-worth,

And the troupe I think helps us get in touch with those parts of ourselves that we don’t recognize as being lovable as being worthy. (12:063)

and increased acceptance of personal struggles through public visibility,

You know by being in front of people and knowing that The Stars of Light is something that is made up of people that have a mental illness, I mean obviously you’re in the spotlight and you’re known as having a mental illness, so you’ve got to kind of face it. Where if you’re not, I mean any other time of my life I could be like “no I don’t have a problem,” I could just deny it. (8:012)

The participants also discussed how troupe involvement has increased their self-awareness,

But through the act of observation of what’s outside and inside yourself, I think you begin to understand that, as you become conscious of your process, which is what actors do, that’s when you have the first step to being able to obtain change. (3:023)

Here the troupe’s experiences link a psychological process involved in the theatrical forms they use to a more general growth process in their lives. Many times this was shared as it relates to the group process of acting together, forming social bonds with other troupe members, and getting feedback in the process.

If someone is not doing well, they’ll reach out to each other. And if somebody is not doing well because they’re not taking care of themselves, they will confront that person as well.
That has happened, too, like, “Wow! This isn’t good, maybe you should be drinking a little less alcohol,” or “You need to get out of that place and live someplace differently,” so we see that happen kind of behind the scenes in rehearsals, especially, or to talk in the van on the way to and from our performance. (4:225)

Another repeating idea shared by the troupe about identity was that a central element of the troupe’s activities in the community is education. The valued social role of teacher, or educator, is internalized by troupe members over time and many participants shared how this ties into a larger sense of purpose in life. The troupe’s artistic director discusses this here.

I think it’s when I’d seen somebody who—and there have been a number of them who’ve been around long enough and started from a very bad place and now, all of a sudden, are people who are truly helping other people. They’ve become the teachers. (3:131)

The troupe also discussed ways that self-exploration can be uncomfortable or frightening at times,

It’s like as if we were a jewel with many different facets and it’s just simply as we turn through life’s circumstances or our own volition that that jewel, the light shines through in a different way and a different color emerges, a different kind of shade emerges. And we choose to allow that to play out or not. The idea either scares us or it doesn’t. (3:099)

I realized I’d never allowed myself to show anger or say no or not be the nice guy and here I was being a villain on stage. Then, after two or three nights, after the week or whatever, I was kind of like, “This is kind of cool.” Not only was it not disturbing anymore, it was so freeing that I was like, “Can I be meaner?” (3:103)
Troupe members also discussed a theme describing how troupe involvement has lead to **discovering and developing skills and talents.** They repeated discussed such issues as **increased creativity,**

> Well, I think I am a little more creative than I was...and I get up in front of people...I mean that, that as far as that, that’s probably changed. I’m a little more comfortable with it.

(11:151)

**learning to work better with a group,** “I guess you learn to work as a group... I mean we kind of piece the show together and we make it flow and that’s helpful.” (11:247), “It has allowed me to work with and along side people who have mental illnesses” (7:013), and **improving social skills,** “You learn social skills while you do this. I mean, there are so many things that you learn doing theatre that you have to pay attention to” (3:069). One troupe member discussed how he has noticed an improvement in his social functioning through the reactions of others in his life outside of the troupe,

> I’ve never really had a lot of people say anything, but once again it goes back to that thing, I mean, you don’t have to really hear it to know that there’s a difference because they act toward you different. You know they kind of like being around you more. (8:324)

Another change over time that the troupe discussed a great deal is an **improvement in ability to speak publically.** This was addressed in the data in terms of performing on stage with the troupe, but participants also notice the improvement carrying over into other areas of their lives as well,

> I think in a way it’s given me more confidence in terms of being able to speak. I’ve never really had the problem of speaking in front of groups, but...of course you’d have the shaky voice and stuff like that but, I mean everyone’s nervous to get in front of a group but once I’m there its ok. But this has given me a different confidence level. (6:033)
Well, it kind of intrigued me, I guess and it kind of scared me at the same time. Cause I’m, I’m not used to getting up in front of people, I’m not that good at it, I mean. As far as being in front of groups and stuff. But I’ve gotten a lot better since I’ve joined this, I mean it doesn’t bother me at all anymore, really. (11:015)

And now I get stage fright and stuff, but I can stand up in front of a very large audience and express myself. And that’s a major change. (12:379)

Somewhat related the improved public speaking confidence, participants also spoke a great deal about how involvement in the troupe has helped in decreasing social fear and isolation. They shared how they have become more socially confident and outgoing, “I think its’ helped me be more outgoing towards other people.” (11:155)

Well part of me, I went to college to be a teacher, so part of me just really wants to teach and inform, but the Stars allows me to be more confident and more outgoing than usual. (6:033)

I think I’m a little less timid. I’m not frightened of groups anymore or anything that much, I mean sometimes it bothers me a little bit - but not like it used to. (11:027)

and they report a decrease in social isolation,

I had isolated myself. I would not talk to anybody. Even just meeting you, it’s like I don’t know who you are and I never liked talking about myself, but getting involved in the group and seeing how strong they are to talk about their issues. At first, that just, “Whoa!” I can’t do that kind of a thing. And they’re accepting and I feel a lot more accepted than I did before, so I think it was a good decision for my part because now I have people I can get involved with and talk to outside of the group, and so, it’s helped me a lot. I’ve changed a lot. (1:093)
And, plus you’re not sitting at home isolating on the couch, vegetating in front of the TV that you really don’t know what’s going on anyway because you’re really zoned out on your own problems. So, you know it’s a great, it’s a great tool for recovery. (9:091)
The idea that troupe involvement is a tool in recovery from mental illness appeared again and again in the data. Perhaps at no other time was this notion more powerfully stated than by this participant,

I think it made me more ambitious and hopeful. When I had a breakdown in August, I lost all hope. I was like I just gave up on everything. I stopped writing and started drinking really heavily. When I got involved with the group, I think more than any hospitalization, more than any of the psychiatrists, I think this group has probably helped me towards recovery more than anything else, just because I got the opportunity to be creative and there’s an open opportunity to write. Interpersonal relationships. It’s helped a lot. (1:095)
The ways in which the troupe’s narrative relates to previous research and theory related to the construct of recovery will be reviewed later in the manuscript.

**Support and Dependency with Janet Wattles Center.** The relationship between *The Stars of Light* and the Janet Wattles Center is characterized by a variety of themes according to the interview, observational, and archival data. The relationship has historically involved most fundamentally a mix of support and dependency. The means by which *The Stars of Light* has been supported by this mental health service agency are multifaceted. One of the emergent themes from the data is that Janet Wattles has consistently offered **ideological support** to the troupe. This type of support involves a basic agreement with the ideological justification for the troupe’s existence and the provision of a supportive atmosphere of partnership and encouragement. One of the most often repeated ideas in this regard involves the **support of the**
agency’s CEO and managing officers. “Well, we wouldn’t have stared in the first place without [the CEO]’s backing….And we, certainly, wouldn’t be allowed to be surviving today” (4:118), “He [the CEO] sees it as an opportunity to continue to be out there and breaking the stigma.” (2:018)

It would be real easy for middle management to go, “Okay. We got to keep the eye on the prize. This is nice, but we really can’t allow it to go on like it has.” And I think [the CEO]’s commitment to it and dedication to seeing it grow and have more influence really is kind of the thriving nature of it. (2:025)

I just think that because there’s an atmosphere that the management really sees this as a very positive thing that I’m allowed to do it and I’m very grateful for that.” (2:018)

In addition, the managing director of the troupe explained how the CEO of Janet Wattles has been very “hands on” in supporting the troupe as an alternative setting for staff and consumers,

So being with this theatre troupe, those are very much personal relationships….And when you talk about having people to your home, now, you’re really breaking boundaries. So what I have done because we have this policy—no unauthorized social interaction with any consumers—so what I’ve done is talk to [the CEO] and say, “You know, gee, these folks with The Stars of Light, they’d like to have like a Christmas party like anybody has. A work Christmas party. Only they’re working not for money, they’re doing volunteer work. How do you feel about me having them over at my house? I just think that’d be great.” That’s how this started six years ago. Well, [the CEO] being the brilliant man he is, he authorized it. He emailed me back and said, “This is an authorized Janet Wattles Center function that you are having. I have now authorized you to have this at your house.” So every holiday time, you know, and every summertime, he does the same thing. He authorizes it. (4:114)
and at times helping shape the content of the performances,

For example, for our radio shows, [the artistic director] and I will talk to [the CEO] and we’ll make a suggestion and, if it’s not a hot topic right now, we’re not going to do it. (4:243)

In this way, the ideological support for the troupe is linked to the ways in which the agency’s management sees the prescient issues at hand in the community regarding mental illness. The troupe members see another element of the ideological support of the agency being tied to having common goals, “I guess I think its just that we all have the same common goals.” (6:227)

The goals of the troupe as reported by members, printed literature, and stated during live performances generally involve decreasing stigma, educating the public about mental illness, and sharing personal stories with the community. These goals and effort are discussed in more detail below under the topic of Social Activism.

The troupe also discussed the ways in which the troupe’s relationship with the Janet Wattles Center has involved financial and logistical support for the troupe since 1996. Key elements of this support involve clerical assistance preparing printed scripts, advertizing, and programs, rehearsal and storage space, and an agency van for transportation. At the core of this financial support is budgetary allocations for troupe operating costs,

We do need to have the support, also, of the Board of Directors because, you know, it takes some money to make this work. We do get some contributions, but-I don’t know what that budget is or anything, but I’m sure our contributions are a fraction of what our costs are to pull this off. (2:033)

This quote highlights another theme from the data, which is many troupe members know very little about the financial and logistical support and operations of the troupe. The managing and artistic directors seem to be the primary mediators between the troupe and the Janet Wattles
Center, and they historically have not involved troupe members in any financial issues. However the efforts involved in loading and unloading equipment and other logistical issues do directly involve troupe members. One of the other repeating ideas from troupe members regarding financial and logistical support is that fund raising efforts might conflict with artistic efforts of the troupe,

I would say, if someone else wanted to set something up, I think they would need some sort of, like, support group or booster, you know, that sort of thing and have a [agency CEO] or have some sort of public official or someone like that that’s really behind them. Because the people who are involved, you know, we can concentrate on what we’re doing with the troupe, but if we had to fundraise and we had to do all those things, I mean, which I used to do in my other life, it would be very difficult to keep it going and keep the energy in it. (2:035)

The managing director offered the bulk of the information about the development of how the troupe has been funded. One key idea about how the troupe has been able to manage operating costs over the many years of it’s existence is that they have used a mix of Janet Wattles funding, volunteerism, and donations. In discussing the prospect of other troupes like The Stars of Light starting up she shared,

…other programs that are based in mental health centers, there’s no funding for this, nobody is paying for it. Unless you’re writing a special grant for a special project and people want a special outcome, there’s no ongoing operating for this. That’s why our troupe is all volunteer. We don’t mind at all if people give us donations and for anything. So I’m not sure, financially, if they’re still afloat. (4:088)

Developmentally, working with the Janet Wattles Center to manage the mix of the various funding sources has been an on going work in progress from year to year,
[The CEO] said, “sure you can travel, but try not to incur expenses and, if you do, you have to let the people know that we don’t charge a fee for our performance, but any and all donations are appreciated because somebody’s got to put gas in our vans.” And, you know, when you present it to people that way, they’re more than generous. So whether you’re at a church and they take up an extra offering or, we just performed for a NAMI regional event in Palatine for a part of Mental Illness Awareness Week. Well, six NAMI chapters went in and they each gave us a small check, but then it amounted to $300 dollars, so that was plenty for our gas and our tolls and having to eat lunch and all of that. When you put that word out as “we don’t want to charge, but boy, gas is pricey,” people will support you. It’s no more that the Janet Wattles Center can just dole out the money, you know, they can’t buy our T-shirts for us all the time. (4:121)

It was never going to be able to be a business that was going to break even. It was always going to be supported, so we had to get rid of the business model. It really wasn’t going to be a consumer run business, which was kind of our dream. It wasn’t going to work that way. And if it weren’t stand alone, it wasn’t something the Center could say, “This is one of our affirmative businesses,” or give somebody a salary for. (4:284)

Another developmental theme about “Support and Dependency with Janet Wattles Center” emergent from the data pertains to the *symbiotic relationship* between *The Stars of Light* and the agency. The participants shared how this has developed over time and involves beneficial outcomes for both the troupe and the agency. The Janet Wattles Center is seen as benefiting in a number of ways from the relationship. For one, the participants repeatedly discussed how *The Stars of Light acts as public relations and outreach for Janet Wattles*. This has historically taken
the form of connecting audience members to Janet Wattles Center through information at performances,

Because at shows we bring pamphlets, and we try to encourage that. But, it gives us a way to say “Here. This is hard stuff.” They come up and say “oh the show’s good. I have this and I don’t know what to do.” And we’re like, “here.” But yet, it’s not really about The Stars of Light. It’s like we are shadowed by Janet Wattles. (6:283)

the production of outreach and training materials, and entertainment for the agency,

And they do come to The Stars of Light for lots of things. Like that banner - they wanted us to come up with the different things and what they look like. And we did a video that got lost in a VCR someplace, that was supposed to be played through the TV’s through the center. And they wanted us to do it. We’ve done several things for them. Any event they are going to do, we usually are the entertainment. (12:289)

On one hand, it’s a marketing tool for the organization and, overall, it’s a marketing tool to try to educate people. (2:029)

Additionally, the managing director of the troupe also works as a training coordinator for the agency, and regularly asks actors in the troupe to share their personal stories of mental illness as part of mental health awareness trainings in the Rockford community. In this way human resources of the troupe are being incorporated into other Janet Wattles programming.

Troupe members also described ways in which they benefit from the symbiotic relationship with the agency, besides the ideological and operational assistance described above. Several members described how working for Janet Wattles facilitates involvement, “the fact that several of us work for Janet Wattles makes it possible for us to be involved” (2:069), in that the agency offers flexible and support employment opportunities that allow for rehearsal and
performance time. Another benefit for the troupe is a steady means of recruitment from consumers of Janet Wattles Center. One participant explained how this recruitment could be enhanced,

Maybe if more people who are going to Janet Wattles knew about it, how many would take that opportunity to try it out? And just let them know that you don’t have to be an actor because some people say, “I’m not into the theatre. I’m not good at it.” And then they don’t realize just how laid back it is and how it may help a lot of the people who go there. It’s something totally different....So if people were encouraged at Janet Wattles, you know, try it out, you never know, we might get a lot more talent. (1:139)

Troupe members also share the ways in which they are looked up to within the agency, especially around the Silver Lining Clubhouse. This status is seen by members to have increased over time,

I think we’re more, each year we do this I think we get respected more – and you hear, well like the other consumers at the Silver Lining Club, a lot of them would want to be in the group but for whatever reason some of them can’t be or whatever. I think that they’re somewhat kind of jealous of us. (11:343)

I think there’s certainly more exposure and more recognition around the clubhouse and around the Janet Wattles Center. Like “oh, you’re in The Stars of Light” you know. People that work there have seen the shows. So we’re more recognizable. There’s a little celebrity going on there. (10:080)

Another repeated idea regarding the symbiotic relationship between the troupe and Janet Wattles is that there has been very little conflict between the agency and troupe over the last 14 years.
The troupe members see this primarily due to having common goals and a mutually supportive partnership.

I don’t think so, really. I mean me personally, I’ve had no conflicts with Janet Wattles. They work hand in hand basically. Um. Janet Wattles and the Stars work together, the clubhouse and the Stars work together. Cause the clubhouse puts together our flyers and our pamphlets.

And um. I don’t know, we all seem to work together. (6:227)

Another related theme that troupe members expressed is their **mixed feelings about troupe independence** from Janet Wattles Center. They generally reported a **pragmatic and accepting attitude** about the troupe’s independence,

Probably not. I mean, they’re just too needy about everything from rehearsal space to where you store your stuff to whose van you’re going to borrow. Right now, it all works. (4:288)

and reported little discussion has ever taken place within the troupe on the issue of autonomy,

I think from day one, we’ve always been closely associated, and so, you know, I guess I don’t know any different, and so, maybe early on, there was a little bit of a question about it.

(2:029)

In 2006 efforts were made to establish the troupe under the production company moniker “Enlightenment Productions,” since the troupe was historically involved with a wide variety of media beyond live stage performance, namely visual art galleries, radio, and video. However this has not brought any significant change in autonomy from Janet Wattles Center,

If you go to the website [of Janet Wattles Center], it’s under Enlightenment Productions, that’s where The Stars fall. So she’s [the managing director] trying to incorporate that, but I think that’s a very slow process. And when that woman’s got so many balls in the air, something’s are going to get neglected. But the thought is there, and the process has starting
but it hasn’t gone very far in the last two years. I think that’s when we started the Enlightenment Productions. We did a mission statement. We didn’t get very far with it….We have a logo and mission statement. And it’s on the website. (12:225)

Troupe members reported a *wide variety of reactions regarding autonomy*, some of which were apathetic, but some of which were critical of the level of dependence on the agency, “we are *The Stars of Light* from Janet Wattles. It’s like, let’s be *The Stars of Light* from Rockford, Illinois. Let them come to us.” (6:283) Among the troupe members who have been with the Stars of Light for many years, attitudes about the troupe’s level of independence were somewhat critical, but nuanced and accepting at the same time. The troupe presents an *attitude of pride and gratitude to both the troupe and Janet Wattles Center*,

I think Janet Wattles sees us as part of their public relations operation. When we go out there we are representing Janet Wattles, more so than just ourselves. So I think our mission is in line with their mission. We’re a part of them. (12:277)

There’s two sides to that story. Janet Wattles is one of the unique mental health centers in this district. Cause it is… we started an employment program, we’ve got a clubhouse….and, we’re probably one of the first to show, people do get better. That there *is* recovery. Which is great. I’ve talked to other people who’ve been to other mental health centers and they’re like, ‘They ain’t got nothing!’ So I am proud to represent them, but I also don’t want people to think that we *are* the mental health center – we are *The Stars of Light*. (12:285)

According to the participants, though the troupe’s relationship with Janet Wattles Center has been supportive, mutually beneficial, and generally successful since the troupe establishment; there have been some **challenges to the partnership**. One challenge relates to the logistics of running the troupe. The troupe requires transportation, space to store props and public address
equipment, as well as space for rehearsals and meetings. Participants stated that these needs have at times been challenging to fulfill. One repeating idea is that sharing resources with other Janet Wattles programs can be challenging.

It would be nice if there were a minivan even if it were old and beat up and we could keep our stuff in it and not load it and unload it all of the time. It’s one thing just to take it and unload it and set it up for a play, but then you have to unload it every time because we’re sharing that van with other case managers. (4:336)

In addition, participants discussed the challenges of limited and inconvenient space available to store equipment.

Yeah I think our space is what 5x8? It’s minimal. It gets very crowded in that little space with all our stuff. And a lot of it ends up in the basement, which is not a very feasible place for it, because it’s damp and dirty. (12:267)

And it’s out of sight so you don’t say ‘oh we could use that’ when you walk in. There’s a lot of stuff that I think we don’t keep because we just don’t have space. And I know [artistic directors]’s got a lot of stuff at his house. (12:269)

Troupe members also discussed challenges related to scheduling rehearsal space. Participants explained that this has to do with adjusting to the reality that The Stars of Light is only one aspect of the activities at the Silver Lining Clubhouse.

Well in a way they consider the clubhouse our home but its not really ours because we’re such a tiny…we are like a dot in that building because they have a bigger purpose than what we do. (12:247)

When they’ve got a room open then we can. Like Thursdays and different times they have group meetings and we can’t get in there. So we have to move our schedule around. (12:251)
Another repeating idea related to **challenges to the partnership** with the Janet Wattles Center relates to the content of their performances. Although not a major point of contention or sense of oppression from the agency, troupe members discussed ways in which they have been directed not to present too harsh a **critique of services and activities of Janet Wattles.** This is exemplified in the following interchange that occurred during the focus group:

*Participant 1:* One time we developed this thing about, “well doctors are a pain in the butt, and waiting for appointments are a pain in the butt, and taking medication and side effects…”— we kind of had this little – we never really got very far with it.

*Participant 2:* Yeah. [Artistic director] was like, “maybe we shouldn’t do this because doctors might be sensitive.”

*Participant 3:* And it was about how you’ll go to the doctors and sit and wait. I mean, I waited four and a half hours one time, and I still didn’t see her because she went to lunch. And I didn’t see her till she got back. So yeah, we were bitching about a lot of that. But they’ve made some changes to their procedures.

*Participant 1:* Yeah they have!

*Participant 2:* One of my big gripes used to be, that was in that sketch, is if you miss an appointment they expect you to call, but when they’re canceling they don’t call you. You end up going all the way downtown and then find out “oh by the way, you’re canceled.”

*Participant 4:* They would let us do ‘behind the desk’ where all the business is coming in, but they didn’t want us to do ‘in front of the desk’ where we are; the half the day we sat waiting and then they’re gone. Or, we can’t see them because the doctor’s too busy. Or they’ll shuffle you off to another doctor.
Participant 3: Or they’re your payee the person doesn’t get their check because your case manager screwed up. And things like that. (12:301)

In general, the participants felt that these challenges were not very detrimental to the troupe’s overall relationship with the agency as a whole or the Silver Lining Club. They shared that overall they have been satisfied with their artistic freedom in relation to performance content about the Janet Wattles Center and frustrations with the mental health system in general. Data suggests that the relationship between *The Stars of Light* and the Janet Wattles Center has remained supportive and congenial throughout the life of the troupe, and that challenges are generally met on both sides with flexibility and compromise.

**Multifaceted Relationships with Community Organizations.** This theoretical construct emerged from the collective troupe narrative and archival data. Here developmental processes at the setting and wider community levels intermingle. The participants explained the various ways that *The Stars of Light* has built relationships, and interacted with, other organizations in the Rockford community and surrounding areas. These relationships have brought the troupe into contact with a wide variety of organizations. These include: social service and mental health organizations, community service organizations (e.g. Rotary clubs), primary and secondary schools, colleges, churches, mental health advocacy groups (e.g. NAMI), television and radio broadcasters, and the criminal justice system. Quantitative data of specific levels of contact are presented later in this manuscript. Several themes emerged supporting this construct that help explain the nature and trajectories of community level contacts with the troupe. One emergent theme is that **performance is the primary, but not only, form of partnership,** with other organizations. Over the troupe’s history, their focus on presenting live performances has
remained at the center of their activities. Many of the participants were able to remember examples of organizations the troupe has performed for,

Well, we’ve done like, Rotary Clubs. But, as far as partnering we’ve done shows….well we’ve done shows at different agencies. We’ve done…. oh, Stepping Stones. We’ve done shows there. We’ve done shows….what is the name of it…people, a drop in center, it’s on Church Street maybe. I can’t think of the name of it though. We do shows there. So we do shows at different agencies. (11:705)

However, the fact that none of the participants have been with the troupe since it’s beginning, the specific history of organizational networking and performance history was collected from the troupe’s directors and archival data. A critical first expansion of organizational networking occurred in 1996 when the troupe established it’s close partnership with the Janet Wattles Center and the troupe presented a full-length performance entitled “Jumping to Delusions.” This performance was a major stimulus for community awareness of the troupe, and contact with community gatekeepers.

[The artistic director] had connections at Rockford College, since he went to school there, to see if they would give us in kind their theatre and new people in the business that could do things like lighting and sound because I certainly wouldn’t have any connections like that. And this time we mixed it up. We had people with mental illness, volunteers from the community, and professional actors all working together and we even brought in celebrities from the community that would do kind of cameo appearances. We had everything from our mayor, you know, to our state’s attorney to one of our judges. (4:065)

This quote also highlights the importance that personal connections have played in organizational networking with the troupe over the last 14 years. Another repeating idea related
to this theme is that financial challenges have played a role in limiting contacts and performances for organizations in a wider geographical area,

Part of the thing is that if we’re going to go to Nebraska or whatever, the outfit that’s contracting us, they got to pay for our expenses, so like a lot of social service fields, there’s not a lot of money to be spread around. (2:133)

Thus, participants explained that most of their performances and organizational connections are localized to the greater Rockford area. Although most relationships with community organizations have centered on presenting live performances, or “tour shows,” to audiences, the troupe has formed other types of partnerships with these organizations. For example, troupe members have been invited to take part in trainings about mental health issues and sensitivities,

Now, the law enforcement training that [the managing director] does at the jail, that’s basically what we’re doing. We get up and tell our stories and try to relate it to, okay, you guys doing your job, the cops, and you come across a person like this, well, don’t automatically think this is just somebody who’s being a jerk. It’s somebody would could be off their medication. It could be somebody who’s hallucinating, hearing voices, the whole nine yards. (2:107)

Another form of partnership involved development in the troupe’s creative activities with an expansion of their organizational networking. The troupe has produced six unique radio programs in partnership with Rockford public radio station. These radio programs have blended skits that they normally perform live, with a variety of personal narratives and information presented by local officials and mental health experts:
When we had a radio show about our mental health court, for example, we made sure the Chief Judge was in the radio show and the State’s Attorney and the Public Defender….and people from probation and, you know, the Chief of Police. (4:076)

Another repeated idea expressed in the data is that *troupe members have less knowledge regarding organizational connections* than the directors. Some troupe members know more than others about previous partnerships and performance histories, but several participants expressed a general lack of knowledge about how the troupe formed and maintained connections with other agencies and organizations.

I have no clue about that. I don’t. You know, I’m not really that high up in the hierarchy to know all the lingo and logistics about, you know, who’s running this program and all that, so I don’t know. (5:076)

Well, I know that Mary has said, ‘Gee, if somebody says to you, we’d like to have you, let me know right away and I’ll contact them.’ I think any of us can kind of keep our eyes out there for possibilities. I really don’t know any more than that. (2:131)

Another developmental theme that emerged regarding the troupe’s community relationships is that the troupe’s *organizational networks grow sporadically* over time. Participants explained the ways in which some *organizational connections occurred due to common goals* related to mental health,

We work really strongly with NAMI, with the National Alliance for Mental Illness. We have a member of NAMI on our board, our staff attend NAMI meetings, and we would say, “Hey, can’t we come and entertain your group, maybe once a year, once every other year?” And then, pretty soon, it was not just their group, but it was going to NAMI regional meetings or NAMI state meetings. So, you know, it would start on that level and then it would grow. We
haven’t done the NAMI national conference. We have a dream of doing that someday…but we’ve done the state conference several times, regional conferences a lot. Those kinds of groups that would kind of be natural stakeholders would be important, but we would also hook up with other groups where there was a hot issue at the time. (4:073)

The troupe has also expanded its community networks through marketing.

They did a CD and then they put together like a marketing package. I don’t know if they got a grant or something. And, essentially, they sent it out to all these like state—well, state NAMIs and state organizations of psychiatrists and psychologists to see if, at their conferences, they would want us to perform. We got a few nibbles out of it. (2:133)

as well as through referrals,

We get referrals from the courts, from the jails, from the police. So it’s a lot of networking that way. Some of it happens just, I don’t know, serendipitously, I guess.” (4:078)

One of the ways the troupe’s community networking growth as been sporadic is that other organizations interest and invitations to the troupe have changed from year to year,

There was a summer event that they were doing. They did it last year—they can’t do this year I guess—where the mental health system in Rockford, all the facilities, all the organizations got together and do some type of a run, and Stars of Light was a part of that group, of this whatever they were doing. So there is an opportunity, but then this year, they said, “We don’t require your services this year.” That’s not cool. I don’t know why, but I think there are probably other opportunities and we just need to find out what that is. (1:185)

The troupe also shared ways in which personal connections to other community members and organizations have built community connections. Here, a participant shares how he perceives himself to be a potential asset to the troupe in this regard,
Because I’ve spent so much time in the public sector and non-profit sector, I’d like to think that I do have a fair amount of contacts in the leadership of the community and things like that, and so, I don’t know, somewhere along the line, if we wanted to expand on the marketing aspect of it, I’d probably get involved with that. Again, trying to stay away from trying to get too many balls in the air. (2:100)

This again emphasizes the impact that shifting troupe membership over time has on the troupe’s networking and connections in the larger community. Troupe members bring with them not only a personal set of talents and narratives, but also particular relationships with other organizations.

Participants also addressed the ways in which **tailoring performance content leads to new organizational ties**. Here, partnerships have offered the troupe the opportunity to **partner with other organizations and individuals to shape their performance topics** and address prescient issues,

We would also hook up with other groups where there was a hot issue at the time. For example, when we [the county] started a mental health court in Winnebago County, we wanted to make sure that we performed for them and that we worked with them, too. And we did a radio show about that. (4:074)

Yeah, it probably won’t hurt to get together with other organizations that sit down and brainstorm about different activities or different skits and stuff like that. Or get their input. (6:219)

Another repeating idea that emerged supporting this theme is that **performance content has led to new targeted audiences and new organizational connections**. The most common example of this from the narrative data relates to schools. Several years ago, the troupe made a decision to address mental health needs of children, and built performance material around themes for child
and student audiences. This material is now in the troupe’s repertoire and has allowed them to connect to both primary and secondary schools, “We have a different show if we do like a grade school, it’s geared for kids. We did like nursery rhymes. Um, skits based on nursery rhymes” (11:677). Schools present *The Stars of Light* as both entertainment and educational programming to students. Participants shared that these education partnerships have lead to schools inviting the troupe back repeatedly over several years.

Another significant theme to emerge from the data supporting the “Multifaceted Relationships with Community Organizations” construct is that *The Stars of Light* have focused some of their energies on **sharing the troupe model**, beyond just performing for community audiences. The “model” here is the general structure and purpose of the troupe; a theatrical troupe involving community members with psychiatric disabilities that uses theater to address topics related to mental illness. One of the ways the troupe has shared this troupe model is in **teaching other organizations about how to start a troupe**. As the troupe has become more well known and established over time in the Rockford and surrounding communities of northern Illinois, the troupe has been approached to offer assistance and suggestions how to organize and promote a troupe like *The Stars of Light*,

I know other organizations are wanting to start up theirs and stuff, and we’re basically the stepping stones for other organizations, because we’re pretty much the first to actually attempt it, and go about doing it. So, it’s kind of neat, because in a way we’re teaching them different ways, I mean they have to come up with their own material and things like that, but its just giving them the guidance and stepping stones to create their own, and urge them to realize just how important expressive therapy, or just being able to express yourself. How important that is to help with your mental illness, and to go above and beyond it. (6:167)
Sinnissippi is one we work with. And [the managing director], they contacted her for help I guess about starting a Stars of Light theater troupe group. There are a few that have reached out to her specifically in regards to theater troupes and how to start one, where do you begin, kind of thing. (6:171)

In addition to explicitly giving guidance to other organizations, participants expressed another repeating idea that they see the troupe’s activities as setting an example through performance. They described the ways in which just presenting their performances can inspire other community groups, “because I think a lot of organizations I think they realize how important it is. Cause they see how Janet Wattles utilizes the theater troupe, and the benefits from it.”(6:219)

We’ve played for them and they all, especially NAMI, they were glad to see us, us doing it. And I think that, more so than just the message I think that people in the agencies feel gratified to see, you know, consumers coming together and doing something positive like this. (10:084)

**Ideas for Future Directions.** The above theoretical constructs and themes primarily address the large amount of data collected regarding the history of the troupe and it’s developmental processes up to this point. However, another major construct emerged from the narrative data that speaks to the troupe’s future. As participants discussed their involvement and experiences with the troupe they also spoke a great deal about their hopes and dreams for future directions. Many participants shared ideas and desires for changes and new directions that they had never before expressed to the troupe. One of the major themes emergent from the data regards expanded roles and responsibilities for troupe members. This theme is supported by repeating ideas related to expanded administrative responsibilities,
I guess I’d like to see us taking more responsibility all the way around for the whole thing. And I know that they’ve talked about that, about making it a self-supporting program. But it’d be nice to, that you know, to have a collective approach to everything. Whereas it wouldn’t be just like, somebody just being an actor in the program, but being everybody taking responsibility for part of the logistics. Or at least, if not everybody, at least, some more consumers. Taking responsibility. (10:164)

Like someone could be responsible for calling everybody and making sure that everybody gets to rehearsal on time or gets to the show on time. You know, informing people of the dates and the times. Calling people and sending out the little notices. Or maybe somebody even handling the bookings. Talking to the places where we’re going to perform. Making the arrangements. (10:166)

[The artistic director] and I are both worried about who’s going to pick this up when we leave? Who do we pass the baton to? The one thing that I would like to see differently is, it would be really cool if I had like a natural assistant and [the artistic director] had a natural assistant. Let’s say he couldn’t make a show, then a guest director or assistant director stepped in, and if I couldn’t, who would fill in for me. That’s the one thing that I would like to change….even if it’s a volunteer assistant to me or assistant to [the artistic director], we’ve got to have a consumer take that over. (4:281)

as well as expanded artistic roles, “I think doing more of that as a group would be nice. Or working together on creating the scripts.” (10:168)

From my writing background and I’ve written plays, I’d like to see if I could get an opportunity to write and see what people think. Maybe give everybody an opportunity to
write something based on their own experiences, whatever they’d like to express. I think that would be beneficial. (1:071)

Another theme that emerged related to future directions for the troupe is the desire for enhanced representation of schizophrenia. The participants discussed this in terms of addressing schizophrenia through performances, “one thing that I don’t think gets addressed enough is schizophrenia. Or the struggle. The struggle that people with schizophrenia go through.”(10:046) As well as involving consumers with schizophrenia in the troupe, “I’d personally like to see more people with schizophrenia participating in our group because I think that would round out our message more” (12:349).

I think people with bipolar, which we’re almost all bipolar or depressed people in the group, you know tend to be more demonstrative or outgoing. And we don’t really get to know as many people in the troupe with schizophrenia, to portray that. (10:047)

We have a hard time finding people with schizophrenia…that kind of have themselves together enough to be able to comprehend and function. Because we have a lot of people that come to expressive therapy, and sometimes they’re not with it, and stuff like that. (12:359)

This last quote highlights an idea that emerged repeatedly from the narrative data regarding the relationship between involvement and level of functioning. This is addressed further below in the findings related to Characteristics of Theater.

Another theme that emerged from participants discussion of future directions for the troupe is the desire to connect to new topics and audiences. The troupe members addressed this in one way with repeating ideas about developing new performance material in general,
They’ve recycled stuff and that kind of, you know, it’s good that they’ve got good scripts, but the same stuff you’ve been doing for years is getting recycled and used again. So I don’t know. I’d like to see more material and more publicity for the group. (1:118)

As well as specific topics such as *addressing substance abuse*,

Maybe how mental illness—how people with mental illness tend to self-medicate before they get help. That is big. A lot of people do that. Maybe have that touched on. Substance abuse. Because it’s huge….Maybe even have a show with a doctor/psychiatrist and the patient, what happens. That sounds like a good idea. (1:077)

And efforts to *address suicide directly*,

Well, if somebody was thinking about suicide and we brought up the subject, I think they would seek help. They would know that they’re not the only ones that were thinking about it – some statistics saying something like, for teenage kids it’s like the #1 or #2 cause of death, I think. So there’s quite a few people thinking about it anyway. (11:407)

In addition, troupe members expressed interests in *targeting specific audiences in the future*. Many troupe members expressed the desire to perform for larger audiences and travel farther away to other communities, as well as seek out specific groups such as minorities,

I’d like to see us definitely get into more of the minority communities because there are a lot of ways in which some minority communities sort of stigmatize themselves by not allowing themselves to understand what is happening because it’s such a brutal attack…it’s hard to understand, but I’d like to be a part of being, of raising awareness in communities like that. (7:081)

and children,
And it wouldn’t hurt to even be addressing, I’m thinking probably, 3rd or 4th grade level. Cause they might start having a better concept of feeling and what they are…Where they’re starting to grasp the idea of having feelings and how they’re feeling. And I think that ought to be something that’s started at that level, in terms of trying to have the theater troupe come to their level. To teach them. I mean granted, you learn about feeling before then, but I think the understanding of the differences between them might start around 3rd or 4th grade. (6:305)

People don’t understand that little kids are sick, too, and that whole thing about ‘get them when they’re young.’ So our troupe has taken, you know, two different times, we’ve done the tour shows about children’s mental health…..it’s a lot easier to impact somebody when they’re three than when they’re thirty…..Let’s get into some early identification and even prevention. (4:157)

Participants also shared opinions about developing independence from Janet Wattles in the future. This came out of the narrative data in repeating ideas about independent rehearsal and performance space,

We could set up…We have drops that we can’t use right now because we don’t have any feasible way to add them in. But if we had our own place we could put in our drops and do a video using these and we could stop the tape rolling and change things around. And that would be a big advantage. Where now we have to drag things out of a cupboard or down in the basements, or what have you. That, and a lot of people would probably use it as a place to go write because it would be quiet, or just the atmosphere would be different. (9:265)
Well I know [the artistic director’s] grand plan is to have a place you can go and draw and do art and not have to put it away when you’re done for the day. Or the time span. You could be there as long as you want. It would be just for the arts. (12:237)

And establishing the troupe as a wholly consumer-run organization,

One thing that was talked about is having it be an independent group. You know, expanding everyone’s role in group. Being self-directed, having participants handling the administrative side of it, and the management of it; and more of the creative part. (10:195)

This repeating idea was directly linked to the theme presented above regarding **expanded roles and responsibilities for troupe members.** Troupe members disagreed at times about how feasible this independence would be at this point; with many feeling more comfortable with the idea of working to develop it over time by first expanding responsibilities for members.

One additional emergent theme regarding future directions for the troupe addresses the **desire for more recruitment and publicity in the future.** This theme emerged in a blended way, where troupe members see *publicity and awareness tied to recruitment,*

It would be nice to see younger people. I don’t know about kids, but college aged because they would just give a completely totally new perspective to the group and could help not only make it strong, but maybe get the word out more because college aged kids, they could spread the word to college. I don’t still think there’s enough media attention. (1:179)

I think it would be nice to have a broadened awareness that *The Stars of Light* even exists. Just that they exist and what is the mission or goal in regards to everything. I think that would probably be the biggest thing to start with, is for community awareness. Let along the awareness we’ve gotten from other agencies. But to be like, broader knowledge just in the community or in the state of Illinois, and go from there to expand. (6:193)
I think there need to be a lot more publicity for the group. It’s just we’re just doing something that is so beneficial and it’s allowing people to express themselves to be creative and give them hope, you know, people who are in it, without judgment. And I think that not only helps the people who are acting, but what they’re doing is so beneficial. I would hate to see the group just flounder to like only two or three people, especially after being around this long. (1:114)

The theoretical constructs presented above are offered here as a means of summarizing emergent processes related the development of *The Stars of Light* at the individual, setting/troupe, and community levels, and how these various levels have interacted to various ends. It should be noted however that these constructs do not constitute all the possible themes and constructs one might pull from the narrative and archival data.

*Social Activism*

The findings that emerged from the narrative and archival data related to the overarching construct of social activism highlight a variety of theoretical constructs. These constructs describe individual level beliefs and motivations, as well as the ways the troupe is acting as a change agent in the community. The troupe members shared how they see themselves and the impact of their efforts on audiences. Constructs emerged related to social activism that also helps clarify how troupe level characteristics influence both actor and audience. Table 4.2 lists these constructs and their composite themes, which are presented in the following theoretical narrative.

*Mixed Reaction to “Social Activist” Label.* The term “social activism” was presented to the participants as an initial term chosen by me to stimulate a discussion with the participants about how they characterize their work with *The Stars of Light*. Data collected from interview and
Table 4.2

Theoretical Constructs And Themes Related to Social Activism

I. Mixed Reaction to “Social Activist” Label
   a. Rejection of the label
   b. Identification with the label
   c. Data collection interactions lead to an exploration of the label

II. Common Troupe Goals, Mixed Motivations for Involvement
   a. Desire to impact local community and society at large
   b. Desire to change the mental health system
   c. Troupe goals aligned with values of the recovery model
   d. Motivations for societal change versus individual gain

III. A Different Form of Activism
   a. A softer form of activism
   b. More flexible and interactive form of activism

IV. Harnessing the Power of Humor
   a. Humor influences the mental and emotional state of the audience
   b. Humor helps to decrease stigmatizing attitudes
   c. Humor strengthens the actors

V. Multiple Means of Impacting the Community
   a. Performances inspire other consumers to speak up
   b. Impact reaches a wider audience than just live performance audiences
   c. Impact comes from sharing with other communities
   d. Troupe members as individual change agents
   e. Measuring impact takes various forms

focus group transcripts, as well as field notes and memos presented evidence that troupe members have a mixed opinion about how they see themselves and the troupe as a whole. One significant theme that emerged was a rejection of the label by many participants. This rejection seems tied to a several repeating ideas. A few participants expressed some initial discomfort identifying with the label of “social activism” due to not being sure of the term’s definition. The interactive nature of the interview allowed for discussion of the term and associations it raises for both the participant and the interviewer. Another repeating idea from the narrative data is that
participants rejected the label of “social activist” because they identify with a variety of labels and characteristics rather than solely one of “activist,” “I’m a little I’m a little bit of this and a little bit of that. You know, I’m not a hardcore social activist, um, I’m not a complete actress either.” (7:037) “For us, we’re really activists and educators but more like educators. I guess you can consider it activism, but at a smaller point” (6:333). A common repeating reaction of participants was one of rejection of the label based on assumptions that “activist” implies a person taking an extreme, and at times aggressive position on an issue. The label was rejecting then since the participants did not see themselves as extremists,

But I really feel that doesn’t fit who I am and, again, I think it comes out of the timelines. It’s like…I’d rather go the long road and just try to, you know, assume that I don’t see the big picture and just do the best I can and, as long as you’re helping people safely along the way, that’s your best shot. (3:205)

Although several participants rejected the label of social activism for various reasons, participants also expressed identification with the label. This theme emerged from a variety of repeating ideas from the data. Some participants expressed a present identification with the label,

Oh, absolutely! Absolutely. I’m trying to think of something to compare it to. Well, yeah, from the standpoint of, you know, I’ve been in politics and I feel like I’ve had more impact on the community than in all the years I was involved with politician work. I went to campaigns and worked in the public sector and all that and I feel that just the three years I’ve been with the Stars have been more impactful than almost a 30-year career. I’m serious…. I think I’m a social activist through the performing. (2:080)
I think so….I think that The Stars of Light are just like the National Alliance for Mental Illness.” (4:168)

and explained this identification in contrast to their identification of the label of “actor,”

Being more a serious type of person, I would probably look at it just a little bit more as a social activist because it’s important to me for people to understand each other in order to communicate and be proactive….To be constructive. To be progressive. To be able to progress in their lives. So I would say I’d lean towards more of the social activist. (5:033)

Participants also repeatedly expressed a feeling that they see stronger identification with the label as something to be attained in the future, “Yeah. I’d like to think I’m heading that way.” (3:057)

As far as an activist I kind of think what I’m doing right now is somewhat of activism, but I haven’t really gone gung ho on anything specific. I probably would love to, and I probably will, but it’s just that right now, it takes a lot to get your life in order. (6:075)

I think there is a big opportunity for this group to be activists…. if we could get out there and educate the public and to become active, I think that things would change a lot more. (1:047)

Participants also discussed identification of the troupe’s activities as a form of social activism linked to a motivation to be involved in the troupe, “So I think that there is this energy in the group that they see themselves as activists. I just don’t think that anybody knows where to go to reach out to the public otherwise.” (1:187)

In addition, participants expressed ways that identification is influenced by other life roles,

In addition to Stars of Light, with my job I’m putting together a marketing plan so we can go out and put on presentations to employers about employing our consumers and what a good
deal it is for them. We use the statistics about how disabled people have a higher percentage of dedication to their jobs. (2:067)

as well as ways that identification is influenced by audience reactions,

I don’t think they saw us as experts. They just saw us as brave and very courageous and then seemed to be cheerleaders, too. “Yeah, you could be really good at representing the mental health public. We like what you’re doing.” There needs to be information out there and we need to get rid of the stigma. So I think that they see us as almost like activists more than experts. (1:211)

Another critical theme that emerged related to the label of “social activism” or “social activist” is that the data collection interactions lead to an exploration of the label. In interview and focus group transcripts, as well as memos and field notes, data indicated that discussions with participants created an opportunity for participants to reflect on the label and their identification with it at a deeper level than they had previously. One repeating ideas that supports this theme is that discussions lead to an exploration of the definition of social activism, Someone that interacts with a social setting, just someone who interacts with a social setting, I mean, for different reasons. Like, maybe, to bring a group together and accomplish one goal or to help someone in particular do something as small as cut up their lunch. (5:035)

If you really want to be a social activist, then I think it’s okay that nobody knows it. I don’t mean hide. But I don’t think you need to be—you start looking at a longer timeline, even if it’s just, “I want to leave the world a better place than I found it.” It’s important that we’re thinking of “when I’m gone,” and I think that, to me, that’s social activism. That’s kind of where you just try to make some kind of difference...It’s like, instead of the political solution
which is, “I need to see it in time for the next election so I can get elected,” you know, you’re thinking of long term solutions, hopefully. (3:059)

Participants also reflected on the ways that discussions on the topic stimulated a new consideration of self-identification,

I see myself kind of as a writer, a writer of skits and music for the show. Social activist, I guess I haven’t really thought of myself that way formally. I do see myself as an actor…And, uh, but you know that’s probably a good, a good thing to think about as far as being a social activist. I think that you kind of planted a seed in me that way. I hadn’t really thought about it before, but I guess I could see myself that way. (10:052)

Common Troupe Goals, Mixed Motivations for Involvement. Another construct that emerged related to the overarching topic of social activism addresses the complexities of the interaction between troupe-level goals and individual-level motivations to be involved in the troupe. The data identify a variety of common goals related to social activism and social change shared across the troupe members that seem to solidify a communal troupe purpose. However the individual members of the troupe expressed variation in their motivations to join the troupe and continue working with the troupe besides these common goals.

A number of common goals emerged that seem to define the mission and purpose of The Stars of Light as a troupe. These goals are found in the narrative data as well as the archival and promotional materials created by the troupe. Analysis of performance content corroborates these goals as well. One of the central troupe goals that emerged from the data is the desire to impact local community and society at large. This desire has shaped and propelled the troupes activities over the course of its existence. Here, the focus of the troupe is on influencing the attitudes and beliefs of the audiences to whom they perform. Several overarching goals support
this theme. One of the primary troupe goals is education. One participant describes her desire to educate through sharing her personal story as part of the community performances,

I mean granted suicide is a really dark topic, but it [the performances] can have where it’s informative….So basically that’s what my idea was to cover for them, to let them know, you might have thought it, but you’re not mentally ill….And then at the end of my thing it just encourages people to just reach out and get the help that they need. And yeah. I think for that it just had the flow of being kind of a positive and informative. (6:119)

Other participants expressed the goal to educate in other ways,

Do you even understand what early identification and prevention is? Do you realize there’s no funding in the State of Illinois for mental health; it’s all fee-for-service? So, you know, we can point people into what questions to ask and who to ask, but we can’t say vote for so-and-so because we know they’re going to do a good job. (4:162)

We’re not there to be popular, you know, we’re there to get across some information in the best way that we can. (7:113)

We talk about ‘people aren’t getting the help they need’ and why they don’t. We talked about insurance parity, you know: break your leg, 80-to-100 percent coverage, break your brain, you’re lucky if it’s 50 percent. And people are getting that “Ah-ha!” thing, you know, when they hear those kinds of facts, so that’s part of it. It’s fact-based. (4:138)

In addition to education, the troupe is also motivated to focus on advocacy for people with psychiatric disabilities. The participants explained the various ways that they see the troupes work in the community as a way to advocate for themselves and other mental health consumers.

For me advocacy is a very important part of what we are doing to make that change, to maybe know that in some small way – or even in a grand way – we have been a part of helping
people find the help that they need *before* they’ve spent so many years without a wellness recovery plan or without knowing what was wrong with them. (12:201)

So much of, when you’re a consumer, you know, so much of it is paper work and programs and it’s kind of like the roles are…you know kind of hammered out to be a certain way. And this way, you know, you can say, you know, “I’m a mentally ill person and this is some of what I go through” and telling it like a story, but not; where they don’t have to formalize it in like a report or something…. It’s kind of like, it’s *our* turn. It’s our turn to get up and say, “This is what it’s like.” (10:086)

I think if you have a consumer audience, it would be more like, “These guys are kind of cool,” you know. “It’s really neat. They’re out there for me.” That’s the powerful thing for consumers and consumer groups is they look at us like we’re kind of heroes, you know, we’re helping them. We’re their spokesperson. And we hear this from them. I’m not making this up. (4:330)

Just the awareness that people with mental illness have special needs just like blind people or deaf people. They should get treated with the same fairness as everybody else. (5:068)

Another focus of the troupe’s efforts, *decreasing stigmatization*, is perhaps the most clearly expressed of all the troupe’s goals. All of the participants discussed the troupe’s desire to decrease the stigma placed on those with psychiatric disabilities at some point during data collection. Stigma is discussed explicitly throughout the troupe’s scripted materials, and in recent years many live performances have incorporated personal stories from troupe members about their experiences being stigmatized due to their disabilities and psychiatric diagnoses.

I think because during the shows we tend to make it so it hits on areas of stigma and how, basically the ideas of the different types of stigma….how uneducated and unrealistic their
view is about certain things. A lot of people don’t really understand schizophrenia and things like that, and it’s like it kind of shows them that…there’s different ways of people dealing with things. (6:050)

It’s like I think it puts them in check. Do you do this kind of thing to people? I think that people hear that and they’re like, “Oh, I’ve done that before and I feel kind of guilty now.” Because they’re seeing someone up there on the stage making all these accusations about somebody because they have a mental illness and saying, “Well, that person might as well just be put away. Their life is over.” And then the audience might be thinking, “Whoops!” And then hearing how this person could, like Lincoln, naming all these people who have made a difference, that also sends a message out there. Did you know that? Did you know that this successful person had mental illness? Look at what they did! I think that that might help with stigma a lot. (1:064)

They see these people, people who they thought were kind of scary or maybe should be locked up, they’re out here and they’re just fine, thank you very much. What’s wrong with them? They’re okay. (4:138)

Whereas the theme addressed above relates to the troupe’s collective goals to directly influence the beliefs and mindset of their audiences, another theme emerged that clarifies the troupe’s desire to change the mental health system. Being mental health consumers themselves, the troupe members are direct stakeholders in this system. Participants’ insider experience and knowledge as consumers seems to help drive the collective troupe goal of system-level change,

And I think that somebody like myself, or other members of the troupe that have been in the system for long enough have probably a closer grasp of what people with other mental
illnesses go through then the average person. So I guess we’d be more qualified than a non-
mentally ill person or a non-professional person to talk about it. (10:050)

Another repeating idea emerged from the data that participants have personal and
collective critiques of the mental health system, and feel motivated to discuss these concerns.

It just amazed me how people that were so close to the social services or even, in some cases,
people in the mental health field themselves, you know, we say one of the truths is that mental
health professionals sometimes are the biggest detriment to people with mental illnesses
getting jobs because they automatically say, “Oh, God, this person’s never going to get a job.”
We, hopefully, prove that wrong every day. (2:111)

Yes, it’s all true. Yes, the system sucks. Yes, you know what? Sometimes people with the
keys are the sickest people around. (3:193)

A related idea also emerged that the troupe as a collective feels it has the power to influence the
mental health system. Data suggest that troupe members see a great potential to influence
gatekeepers at many levels of influence within the mental health system, from clinicians to
policy makers at the state level,

It might give clinicians a view of what is happening outside their little area…Without
someone standing on our tippy toes and screaming in their face. (12:315)

I’ve gone down state, and been there screaming outside the capital building and stuff for
things, and… it falls on deaf ears. But I’ve seen where our show, when there’s been people in
power, mayors and what have you, hear our stories and are put to it this way, that it sparks
more of an interest and it doesn’t fall on such deaf ears. (9:147)

Another emergent theme is that the troupe’s stated goals are aligned with values of the mental
health “recovery model” (Fisher & Chamberlin, 2004; New Freedom Commission on Mental
Health, 2003; Ridgway, 2001). For example, data showed evidence that the troupe’s goals and activities are focused on presenting a positive and strengths-focused view of persons living with mental illness, “and we’ve got three new people, so here’s what they’re capable of; here is what their gifts are, you know” (4:169), “so the Stars are, it’s a good way, it’s a positive way to put a spin on mental illness. Where it’s not so stigmatizing” (6:045), “if we want to do something about families in recovery, let’s put a little bit more of a positive twist” (4:254). These participant quotes highlight how this repeating idea relates to both the philosophy of inclusion guiding member participation, as well as the tone of the live performances. Another repeating idea emerged that the troupe’s activities are designed to be consumer-driven. This is seen in the incorporation of personal narratives in the live performances, as well as troupe efforts to build scripted skits around issues that are brought up by the members. Here, the managing director describes how she and the artistic director try to work with the ideas of the troupe members,

> We might throw out an idea like, “We want to show what’s it like to be on both sides of the mental health center. What do you guys want to do?” And they’ll just take it and run with it. We might shorten it up or embellish it, but it’s their work. (4:266)

Participants also explained how performance material is occasionally built directly off of the real lived experiences of the troupe members,

> And there’s a skit about that. And I don’t know if it came about because it actually happened, or if it’s something that somebody thought of. Which I believe that it might have been something that actually happened. So. I think it’s more of our personal experiences, or just different quirky ideas we’ve come up with. (6:341)

Another repeating idea from the data that indicates adherence to principles of the recovery model in the troupe’s collective goals is that the troupe offers valued roles for members. The troupe’s
fundamental sustainability is tied to member involvement and commitment. The troupe members serve the troupe as actors, writers, sound effects technicians, musicians, as well as setting up and moving sets and props. The troupe members shared how they feel valued by one another and rely on each other to make the performances a success.

We are all putting the show together so it’s gotta flow, each piece, I mean each person has to be a link – and they have to do the best they can in the show, and make their part of the show is as good as the rest of it. (11:251)

In addition, the idea emerged that the troupe offers consumers valued roles as teachers for the community. The artistic director explained his experience in this way,

There have been a number of them who’ve been around long enough and started from a very bad place and now, all of a sudden, they are people who are truly helping other people.

They’ve become the teachers. (3:131)

Another major emergent theme related to the troupe’s alignment with recovery values is that the participants feel *troupe involvement assists in members personal recovery* from mental illness.

Participants discussed recovery in terms of decrease in psychological struggles and symptoms, as well as progress related to relationships, employment, skills, empowerment, and stable housing.

They had gone for years where they didn’t work and they were in hospitals. They were in the *Stars* for two or three years and then, all of a sudden, now, they’re doing great. They got a job. They got a car. They got their own apartment. (1:151)

It’s very exciting to know that someone has recognized this kind of activity as possibly a crucial element in the various steps toward recovery. (12:383)

She [managing director] really, deeply, truly cares about recovery. But you know, she is not afraid to use the resources or do what has to be done and I know I’m backed up. (3:123)
This last quote highlights the ways in which troupe members see the troupe’s directors as helping maintain a recovery focus in the troupe. The troupe’s managing director describes the ways troupe involvement helps with skills development this way,

There are a lot of different skills people have to use. I mean, there’s everything from personal skills to family life skills, because we are a tight-knit family, to skills of being able to talk in the community, so it’s very skill-based. And with those skills, people not only get to learn them and practice them and get better at them, but sometimes they even brag about them in those talkbacks that we have after the shows. (4:136)

Although the above themes describe a variety of common goals shared among troupe members and manifest in the troupe’s activities, data also suggest that individual troupe members’ motivations to take part in the troupe vary to some degree. The theme constructed to encapsulate this addresses the troupe members’ motivations for societal change versus individual gain. None of the participants described their personal motivations as entirely based on either societal or individual gains. This repeating idea describes the blended aspect of motivation, “you’re getting the message out, and you enjoy it and it’s helping you.” (2:063)

I think people would rather see it as kind of a volunteer type thing. That it’s something they do for themselves and for the community. It’s like, you know, like being involved with a charity—charity is not the right word—but it’s like why you get out on Saturday and pound nails with Habitat for Humanity. It makes you feel more that you’re contributing something and that it gives you some self-worth. It really does. (2:069)

However the data suggest that some of the members see their primary motivation for societal changes, whether to first get involved,
It’s a good opportunity because there is a lot of stigma and I thought that it was interesting that there would be a group of people that would get together to do anything, you know, to use the arts to educate the public. (1:006)

or to continue working with the troupe to impact the wider community, “I really enjoy it because I’m hoping what I’m telling them helps them understand a little more, or even give them another idea of how they could do something differently” (6:103).

In contrast, other troupe members emphasized their involvement being tied to a primary motivation for personal gains,

I think it was more for me than - it was kind of selfish for me. I wasn’t that concerned about getting the word out to other people, it was more helping me than helping others probably – it’s kind of selfish. Yeah there’s an added bonus that you’re getting, getting information out and your helping people understand, but it’s still kind of for me. (11:075)

I just pretty much like to do the acting, and be a part of it. (8:120)

The therapy behind it. How it helps you realize that having a mental illness is okay. (5:164)

Well one of the things that motivates me is, in my personal life it keeps me be active. It gives me some purpose. It gives me a chance to get out and do something creative and be with people. (10:022)

Another repeating idea emerged regarding motivations for involvement relates to family members. Participants shared that their desire to take part in the troupe is maintained in part by factors such as wanting to inspire other family members who live with psychiatric disabilities, and wanting to be respected and admired by family members for their efforts with the troupe,
Because I had children I had to do something a little more constructive. I had to both show them that fear of having an illness like this, and also the force of rising above it most of the time at least. (7:159)

**A Different Form of Activism.** One of the most significant theoretical constructs to emerge regarding social activism and *The Stars of Light* addresses the way the troupe classifies the type of activism they take part in around issues of mental illness. Throughout the narrative data, themes presented themselves that situated the troupe’s activities in contrast to what was perceived as more standard forms of social activism. In one overarching theme, participants shared their views that the troupe’s work in the community is a **softer form of activism**. This theme is supported by the repeating idea that the troupe’s performances are a *non-threatening and passive form* of activism compared to other types of activism, which participants described as more “in your face,”

It’s more like passive. Per se. It’s not like we’re out there in somebody’s face, kind of thing. It’s like our audiences pick and choose us. It’s not like we choose them. So, I think that might make a big difference too in regards to how they react or interact with us. (6:333)

I think it’s kind of a non-threatening way to address a situation that’s really serious, in terms of the type of people it reflects. (6:091)

I think we try to present it truthfully and with humility and…. Those two things. Be truthful and humble and people like that, and it doesn’t frighten them. (7:193)

This non-threatening approach seems congruent with one of the major anti-stigma messages of the troupe; that people with psychiatric disabilities should not be feared. Related to the idea of passivity is another idea that constitutes this theme. Repeatedly the participants discussed the
troupe’s work to influence the attitudes and beliefs of the community as *more gentle than other forms of activism*,

Personally I feel that it’s a subtle way of hitting people before they know it. It isn’t hitting them with a hammer – it’s hitting them with a little humor to open their mind a little bit and then the serious stuff sneaks in. And then before they know it they’re going “hmmm…” Instead of waving and screaming with bullhorns, we sneak in the backside. I think it’s a good form. Granted, a big national response with thousands of people does a lot, but sneaking through the back door subtly… so people don’t think “oh no, we’re going to a rally where there’s a lot of ruckus, etc.” – they think we are going to theater – to me it’s a great, and a different, way to do it than most people. (12:273)

I look at the Stars as a better way to communicate our social activism. I’ve gone down state, and been there screaming outside the capital building and stuff for things, and… it falls on deaf ears. But I’ve seen where our show, when there’s been people in power, mayors and what have you, hear our stories and are put to it this way, that it’s sparks more of an interest and it doesn’t fall on such deaf ears. So its, I consider it, in a way, to activate more then going down and throwing a protest. (9:147)

In addition to describing *The Stars of Light* as more gentle and less threatening to audiences, the participants also discussed the troupe’s activities as *more flexible and interactive* than other forms of social activism. This theme is built from several repeating ideas that emerged from the narrative data, as well as evidence from observational and archival data. One repeating idea regards the ways that the *troupe adjusts to audience factors*. This adjustment occurs in the planning stages of the tour season, as the troupe chooses topics and formats that fit target audiences, as well as in moment of performance and interaction with audience members.
Participants shared experiences such as changing the emphasis of their personal story segments in performance,

From the audience. If it’s a group of kids I lean towards the schooling, and if it’s adults I lean towards the hospitalization and jobs and my every day adult life so and it’s never the same. I mean it kind of is, but it just never is, which is to me is more, gives the audience more because I am speaking off page. (9:015)

and adjusting to audiences comprised mostly of mental health consumers,

It depends on the mentality level of the consumer. Some of them…it’s just kind of funny because we can all pretty much adapt to the audience, or the level. And they all – they still have their good questions, and want to understand, or else they want to stand up and give their story…. I think we’ve learned to adapt to the different audiences. (6:301)

Another related repeating idea emerged regarding adjusting to societal changes and different topics on mental illness. Here as above, the troupe shifts its focus to address prescient issues of the day regarding specific diagnoses, topics, or social problems,

We’re doing stigma busting in a different way…We used to do skits about, “This is what it’s like to have schizophrenia.” Now, we’re trying to do stigma busting about mental illness in general, not necessarily a particular diagnosis, so we change. Like I said, the children’s thing. That was a change. When we were working a lot with police officers and mental health courts and traveling a lot around that, we had [troupe member] write a song about “Crazy in Jail.” (4:270)

Society is going to change. It’s changed tremendously just from what we know about past treatment of the mentally ill. From what we know about the surge of medications, and the
science that has come to recognize certain things. So as society changes and either accepts or
runs into some conflict – then our approach will continue to change along with that. (12:139)
Another repeating idea that addresses the interactive nature of the troupe’s activities in the
community is that the *troupe members share themselves more personally than other forms of
activism*. Participants see this tied to the telling of their personal stories in performances and
trainings, as well as the personal discloser that often takes place during talkbacks with audiences.
One participant discussed this in terms of the empathy and connection he feels to others in the
audience and community that live with a psychiatric disability,

I use the metaphor, “Eating the elephant one piece at a time” and that’s kind of what you’re
doing. I do the same thing with, again, my work. When I first sit down with somebody, I talk
about some of the struggles I’ve had so that they know that they’re not just talking to some
social worker who has got a degree, but that I’ve had these struggles and I’ve walked in their
moccasins, and so, anything they tell me, I can relate to and I can understand. And then the
*Stars* are a carryover of that attitude. (2:119)

**Harnessing the Power of Humor.** This emergent theoretical construct connecting themes related
to social activism with themes related to characteristics of theater. Many times throughout the
narrative data participants emphasized the power of humor within the troupe’s activities. In
addition, archival data analysis and review of live performances showed a consistent
incorporation of humor into the scripted works of the troupe. Since the majority of the themes
that constitute this construct relate to humor’s ability to amplify the troupe’s message and impact
audiences, it is presented here rather than under the topic of characteristics of theater below.
Participants repeatedly described the ways they have seen humor influence the mental and
emotional state of the audience, and the ways this makes their performances a more effective
means of influencing social change in the community. One repeating idea within this theme is that *humor relaxes audiences*, making them more open to receive the anti-stigma and educational messages presented to them,

I think it’s the way it’s presented a lot of times, because if it’s presented in a non-threatening manner or a laid back approach. Humor seems to be a great way to put that out there, which then relaxes the audience and they’re not so apprehensive to what we’re saying, or the topic maybe. So I just think it puts it in a different format for discussion. (6:055)

If I’m in a good mood and people start talking about depression all of a sudden, if there’s no humor involved and they’re just talking about depression, I start feeling dark and gloomy and feeling down in the dumps. I mean, you can get that point across to me like you’re having a problem with a smile on your face and it makes a little easier to accept. (8:472)

Another related idea that participants brought up repeatedly is that *laughter is a highly effective means of getting audiences’ attention*. Humorous skits are regularly included in the troupe’s performances prior to more serious or emotional material. The participants explained that they find this to be a useful tool to get and maintain audience focus and engagement, and feel that it increases the impact of their message and personal stories,

We’re kind of engaging them with some humor…and then it’s like, “ok, now that we have your attention, so-and-so is going to tell you about their experience with stigma.” And it’s a very real experience. You know it’s very raw. Rather than just standing up there, saying, “ok we’re going to present you our stories of stigma today.” Some people might really follow that, but I think it gets everybody in when we do the humor. (10:158)

And if you come out with humor first its always going to grab the audience, and especially those people who have an illness and have not talked about it. It sort of lightens the load, the
burden on their shoulders, and allows for them to breath and say, “wow. It is okay to say that I have ADD. It’s not shameful. (12:063)

Participants also emphasized that they feel **humor helps to decrease stigmatizing attitudes**. One supporting idea of this theme is that they feel that **humor helps audiences remember** what they’ve witnessed at *The Stars of Light* performances. The participants speculated that this may have to do with a connection between emotional activation of the audience and encoding memories of their experience seeing the performance,

Well, people not only feel good and have fun, but we know humor helps with your memory. You’re going to remember things better when there are emotions attached, so you’ll remember when you were afraid, you’ll remember when you were happy and laughing, and you’ll remember when you were sad. We want people to remember things when they walk away and, even if they don’t remember all the facts, they’ll remember the feeling, so it’s enjoyable but educational. (4:275)

We’re just not telling ‘em facts and stuff, that, that probably’d just go right over their head as far as keeping it. This way at least when you make ‘em laugh, they at least, I don’t know, they probably think about it more cause at least they, they remember it cause it’s more memorable than just quoting statistics or facts. (11:111)

Another way the participants discussed the power of humor to decrease stigmatizing attitudes is through *presenting themselves with humility*. Here they describe a kind of modeling, where actors are able to be light-hearted and humorous in presenting issues about stigma, and this in turn disarms and gets through to audience members,
How they change stigma? Let me see. Because we’re able to laugh at ourselves, number one.
We’re talking about stuff that’s really, you know, some of the stuff we do has serious
undertones to it and we’re able to just go up there and laugh about it. (1:062)

An additional theme that emerged regarding the harnessing of humor involves the inner
experiences of the actors. The participants discussed how humor strengthens the actors,
and this in turn makes their performances stronger and more confident. Furthermore, during informal
conversation with participants they discussed connections between their confidence and strength
as performers and the level of impact on audience members. One idea shared by participants is
that humor helps them in self-discovery and confidence building.

Humor is good for us. Even as consumers sometimes it’s hard to find humor when you are
either at that midpoint when you can’t quite feel either way, it is a very uncomfortable place
to be – humor is a wonderful tool. We find it in ourselves, we find it in each other. It’s
something that’s very helpful. (12:113)

I think the humor also to me it seems like kind of an Archie Bunker thing, you know, where
the whole purpose was to reflect the stereotypes of society. Sometimes it allows us to see a
little bit of humor in this idiosyncratic way that we express our illnesses, our symptoms, and
things like that. It is also very freeing to be able to not only recognize it for ourselves but to
share with other people the perception of mental illness really needs to change. (12:063)
One troupe member remembers an experience when she was playing a comedic character in a
performance that illustrates this idea,

When I was doing “KV, The Cooking Lady, and Borderline Brownies,” it hit me and it
dawned on me. This is borderline personality disorder and I’m standing up here making fun
of it and I just got diagnosed with it two weeks ago. And then, I thought - it doesn’t bother me
so I don’t see how it could bother anybody else. I think that recovery, you know, when you recover from something, when you’re trying to fight something that could bring you down, you have to laugh about it. I think that makes you feel like you have control. It makes you feel like you can fight this thing. (1:082)

The theme that humor strengthens the actors’ performances is also supported in the data by the repeating idea that humor helps the actors stay relaxed on stage,

It effects your mood for one…It probably effects your performance because if you’re more scared of doing it you wouldn’t probably do – you’re not as loose and you won’t do as good – if you’re not making sense and stuff it doesn’t really bother you. (11:035)

Behavioral observation data also supports this idea. The tone of the rehearsals and pre-performance environment is consistently focused on joking around and keeping interpersonal interactions playful as a means to remain relaxed and manage stage freight. The troupe, as a collective, regularly makes light of mistakes as a means of dispersing self blame and tension. Overall, the use of humor is a critical part of the troupe’s activities, and is seen by participants as transformative tool for both actor and audience.

**Multiple Means of Impacting the Community.** Inquiry into The Stars of Light’s processes of social activism found a major theoretical construct emerge addressing how the troupe impacts the larger community in a variety of ways. This construct is composed of the various themes that arose from the data explaining how participants have witnessed the troupe’s impact, as well as review of archival information about the troupe’s past activities in the community. One of the central supporting themes that emerged addressed how the troupe’s performances inspire other consumers to speak up about their own experiences with mental illness. The participants explained how they have witnessed this personally during performances,
There was a woman who came up to me and told me about one of their - a member of their church who was so ecstatic at being able to see so many other people like himself. And she said that he was smiling from ear to ear and was just feeling really good about himself…. a woman who was, I would say at least sixty had come out for the very first time in her life as having something, as having a disorder…I mean that’s a very difficult thing… it absolutely touches people. And if it makes them feel brave enough to stand up and say ‘I’m not going to hide this anymore’ for the very first time in front of our troupe. I think, yes, we’ve made a difference…but that day I thought, this day was well spent, because of one person. And if we have to reach them one person at a time, that’s a good day. (7:053)

We’ve had people stand up and say, “Gee, I have a mental illness and, now, I feel okay to tell people that.” That’s very moving. Very emotional. (4:022)

In addition to first person accounts, the participants also repeatedly shared their assumption that the troupe inspires consumers to discuss their struggles openly in other life settings, even if they do not speak up in the presence of the troupe,

Every time we connect with somebody a tie is strengthened and so in her community now she’s a tie and she’s going to strengthen that community. The whole community, you know. Who knows how many people she’ll reach, who will be able to stand up and not be ashamed. (7:057)

In this way, troupe members described a presumed domino effect taking place in the communities to whom they perform in terms of advocacy and seeking mental health services.

Another related theme that emerged describes the means by which the troupes' community impact reaches a wider audience than just those present at the live
performances. Participants see this occurring in two ways. One primary idea that emerged is that the troupe’s radio shows have a wide community impact,

We do a radio show. I mean that’s probably the furthest activism in terms of being out into the media. Or out into the public. Cause that would be the more public broadcasting of the stigma. As opposed to the theater, where [just] the audience picks up. I think probably…you ought to have a talk radio show about mental illness, like once a week or something. (6:337)

So radio shows would be the other way. It’s not just stakeholders and trying to work into their groups, their meetings, their educational programs, but a lot of this was reaching out with our radio shows. (4:074)

To date the troupe has partnered with the local public radio station and produced seven broadcasts. Compact disc copies of these radio shows are also available for free at the troupe’s live performance. In addition to the radio shows, the participants described the broader impact they feel they have on the community through the law enforcement trainings they help present. Participants feel these trainings have the power to improve consumers’ rights within the criminal justice system,

For the police officers we don’t do skits. It’s a panel and we all talk. And… sometimes I think that they’re afraid to even ask questions, and, I don’t know. I think that with the stigma that law enforcement has in regards to the mentally ill is really strong and very negative. So, I mean that’s a topic that we’re trying to break down barriers and walls with them. (6:353)

Training for the police and judges, etc., there’s been more of that. We just did, I think, our first show, which was a pretty good show for probation officers. That’s kind of caught up in the last few years. (3:163)
The participants feel that by changing the mindset of people such as police officers, judges and probation officers, they can help many community members who live with psychiatric disabilities with whom they may never have any personal contact. Another repeating idea emerged supporting this theme that addresses how the participants see the troupe’s *activities impacting mental health policy gatekeepers*. Here the participants discussed the impact they can have on not only members of the criminal justice system, but other politicians and policy makers as well,

I never would have expected, you know, performing for the Chief Judge of this judicial district which is a two country area. The judges have more power and authority than the President of the United States, so you know, I think that’s something that we feel pretty tickled about. When you have, like, the Chief of Police raving about you or saying that you’ll come and perform for my staff or my team, these are influential people. You know, the mayor. So not just political figures, but people that are really hard workers out in the community. (4:080)

The troupe’s managing director discusses the impact that gatekeepers’ involvement in one of the troupe’s radio production can have on the wider community this way,

Once they’re involved and they want to know more about us, they’re going to take that back with them. They’re going to tell their family and friends to listen, but it doesn’t even make any difference who heard the show, they have been impacted now and a lot of those people are our gatekeepers. (4:078)

Another theme emerged addressing the multiple means of community impact that describes the participants’ assertion that another form of *impact comes from sharing with other communities*. As mentioned previously, *The Stars of Light* has historically assisted groups
in other communities in developing their own theater troupe. One positive outcome addressed by the participants is that by promoting the troupe’s model they are promoting new roles for people with psychiatric disabilities,

I think it was a state NAMI conference, it was, “how to start your own theatre troupe.” It was kind of that sort of thing, “101.” We have no problem doing that because there were other people, as we got more and more out and about in the state, saying “Wow! This is really cool! We’d like to have one of those, too.” So we offered it and...people came in and got the materials. We had a lot of good handouts for them and we always tied it into the storytelling, you know, getting people out there to be able to say, “I have a mental illness.” (4:086)

More so than just the message I think that people in the agencies feel gratified to see, you know, consumers coming together and doing something positive like this. (10:084)

Another repeating idea emerged positing that the act of sharing the troupe model is beneficial to the wider community because it promotes partnerships between mental health service organizations. These partnerships are seen as means of strengthening programming across agencies, offer mutual support and ideas, and create meaningful lasting ties at a systems level,

They were able to discuss questions and concerns that they had and maybe it was just because we were directing the information to other people who have mental illness. And it just gives them a different insight in regards to how things come about, or what’s out there for them to get a hold of, or do. Cause one of the things I think we handed out was how they could start their own personal story. And that’s kind of like a stepping stone of where to begin for a lot of people. (6:175)

One of the areas that took us seriously was in the quad cities, in Rock Island, and they decided, “We’re going to do this, by gosh, by golly, there are just too many positive things.
There’s the recovery of the individuals. Obviously, there’s a marketing aspect of this. You certainly get a lot of community buy-in. There are so many plusses to this, we want to do this.” So we worked with them in starting up their troupe. They came here and visited several times. We went there and visited. It was fun. (4:086)

In addition to the impacts of promoting new roles and organizational connections, the participants also discussed how they see connecting with other communities forwards the troupe’s goals of stigma reduction and community education. Participants repeatedly brought up examples of the troupe being open to helping other communities, who do not have a group like The Stars of Light,

A different county bigger than ours population wise didn’t have anybody because, we were asked by this county to do a tape for doctors - regular M.D.’s, to understand what mental illness is, what depression is, what bipolar and all that together is. And they came in and interviewed us and it’s just they don’t have anyone in that county that’s willing to do that. We were kind of like “Hey, anything we can do.” And then we got involved in, the state wanted recovery tapes and so I helped with that and there’s just been so many things that have snowballed. (9:027)

Another emergent theme addressing the way the troupe can impact the wider community describes the troupe members as individual change agents. In contrast to themes describing the collective impact of the troupe as a whole, here the participants explained how they personally can impact their community through contact with their social networks. Participants explained this as another “domino effect” wherein members grow and develop personally in life and recovery, then spread the positive change outward as they touch others in their work, family, and social roles in the community. The members of the troupe therefore become vehicles for
change beyond the setting of the troupe. Participants discussed this in *general terms of social contacts*,

That in itself creates change, as each one of us becomes accepting of ourselves. We touch other people’s lives in a personal way. We touch other peoples lives – people that we know who don’t know about mental illness. We do it that way. We do it as a troupe. So, as each of us changes, we touch a lot of different people with that change. (12:135)

As well as specifically how *personal growth affects their employment networks*.

It’s made me more confidant and its made me more able to speak out in terms of mental illness. ‘Cause my coworkers at the post office, I mean dealing with people “going postal” and all that crap. And they’re always making some comment about people being crazy and stuff like that. So the people I work with they all know I work for Janet Wattles so it wasn’t long after that I was like “no I’m a client too.” You know. So they’re always asking questions and stuff and I’ll tell them different things, but, a lot of them don’t know the whole story, they just know I have a mental illness. But. Yeah. It’s made me be able to talk more about it. (6:037)

The themes presenting thus far address the impressions of participants regarding the various ways they see troupe activities impacting the wider communities of which they are a part. Another central theme also emerged that addresses how the troupe has formed these impressions. Through this topic the participants explored how they measure and appreciate community impact. The overarching theme that emerges from the data addresses how

**measuring impact takes various forms.** Data suggest that the most concrete way the troupe has historically measured its impact is through the *use of audience feedback surveys*,

We had an audience satisfaction survey and we actually tallied those up so we would get feedback in writing from our audiences and we even put that through a performance improvement initiative as, like, a performance indicator for our theatre troupe. Those were always positive and they were positive in a couple of different ways. When we would perform for consumer groups or family groups, they had a different type of reaction than the general public who might not know anything about mental illness. For them, it was more like an “ah ha!” or “wow! I didn’t know that,” or “this is so cool.” But with people who are the consumers or the family members of consumers, they’re more talking like, “you really get it. You understand me and maybe I could do this someday?” So it’s been very different depending on who our audience is. (4:022)

They’re very old, though. I mean, because we started this back in 1995, remember, so we’re talking about the first three, four, even five years maybe we did it that way. (4:026)

In addition to collecting written feedback, data also supports the idea that the troupe has appreciated its impact through feedback on visibility and community awareness of the troupe. The managing director explained an experience of getting feedback from a Janet Wattles community-wide survey,

What was interesting is when they surveyed the general public, they found out that some people knew about Janet Wattles Center, but those who did, didn’t even know we served children, and that most of the people that they surveyed said they’d heard about The Stars of Light theatre troupe, but didn’t even know about the mental health center because they had been impacted. So we’re like—we’re a little happy about that—so we knew then, in other ways that we find out through the side door, that we had had an impact in the community. (4:028)
Another repeating idea supporting this theme is that *anecdotal evidence of audience impact* is a primary means of appreciating impact. Participants repeatedly shared their personal experiences of witnessing impact through interaction with audience members,

Every time I’ve interacted with somebody after a show, they have been completely just open…They embrace you with open arms, so to speak, and there’s never been a bad connotation of responses. It’s always been a good thing. Good responses that we get from the audience, you know? “You did really great up there,”… and it’s always, you know, pleasing to know that we’ve an impact on their lives. (5:028)

When we were talking at the high school. When the kid asked me a question – that was kind of powerful because you don’t expect it and…I’m sure there’s other people that have asked questions and stuff that you know are getting help and so that’s powerful. It shows that we are getting a point across. (11:335)

Probably just by, just well that would be when you’re doing it live, where you’re getting feedback during, like from the people after the show. And they’ll come up and talk to you after the show. At the last show one woman came up and she said that what I had to say directly impacted her. She was like, “what you said was very important for me to listen to.” So that was really kind of cool. (6:107)

Although participants drew upon many personal experiences such as these, a related idea emerged that participants often *assume impact through general impressions over time*, and not from specific personal examples,

I don’t really look for the impact. I just figure you go out, you do your best, 100%, you give it your all, then you’re going to impact somebody, you don’t need to hear it, you don’t need to feel it, I mean you know it’s going to be out there if you do your best. Just kind of have faith
in what you’re doing and hope that you’re reaching somebody. It may not be right at that
time, it may be six months from now. Somebody might be like “oh yeah! I remember the
SOL.” (8:068)
Well, we’ve heard quite a bit about being inspired about the troupe and just the show. I mean,
pople seem to get the information out of it and they seem to want us back – so we must be
doing something okay or right. (11:323)
An additional repeating idea related to the measurement of community impact is that many
participants expressed a desire to know more about the impact of the troupe’s activities on the
larger community.
I think that would—especially with our purposes in the first place, going out there to educate
people, it would be important to know what people think. I think that would—just the
feedback from the audience could inspire a skit, you know, it could inspire whatever. We
would be able to know that we’re making a difference. (1:197)
I think it would be helpful to know we were doing something good. You have the idea we are,
but sometimes you don’t know why you’re doing it. I think it would be a good thing if we did
know. (12:081)

The theoretical constructs and themes presented here summarize many important issues
regarding the social activism of The Stars of Light. Here the individual, setting, and community
level of analysis influence one another 1) in terms of how the individual participants sense of
self, motivation, and views of the troupe are affected by audience/community factors, and 2) how
the activism of the troupe around mental health issues and connections with community
members are influenced by the personal experiences and motivations of individual members and
the troupes overarching goals.
The third overarching topic of interest in the present study is to explore the characteristics of the theatrical form as it is used by *The Stars of Light*. The goal of this component of the study is to identify theoretical constructs that explain how theater as an artistic and organizational format is used by and influences the troupe, the actors, and their interaction with the community. Data analysis of narrative and archival sources lead to several emergent theoretical constructs. As with the two topics addressed above, these constructs elucidate how troupe and individual level characteristics influence one another, and how the troupe’s activities connect the members to the wider community. This section of the narrative offers a deeper look into the participants’ experiences as actors and the unique benefits and challenges of the theatrical form. Table 4.3 lists these constructs and their composite themes, which are presented in the following theoretical narrative.

**Growing the Self and Escaping from the Self.** The primary role the troupe members play within the troupe is one of actor. Involvement in the troupe asks the members to play a variety of fictional characters, and bring their creative and expressive talents to bear on stage in front of one another and public audiences. Data indicate that acting is a complex experience for the troupe members, allowing them a chance for deeper exploration of themselves, but also a chance to escape from their daily struggles. This construct emerged from three major themes. The first of these themes addresses the ways in which the participants experience **personal growth through acting**. Although aspects of personal growth are addressed above in relationship to individual-level developmental processes, here the data speaks to the specifics of how performance and acting influence personal change and growth. One of the repeating ideas that emerged from the data that supports this theme is that *acting on stage leads to overcoming fears,*
So it makes you grow. It makes you know that you’ve just done something that you were utterly terrified of doing. Afraid of failure, afraid of messing up, forgetting your line,
whatever…what a wonderful growth and spirit is that to overcome. To overcome. And a lot of what we have to overcome with a mental illness are our fears. Are our difficulties with communication. Our phobias…our paranoia. The tricks that our minds play on us, when we think we’re not good enough. You have to take all that with you...I took it up there with me last week. You know, I had it all up there with me, had the backpack on and I still made it through it and I did it better than I did the week before. (7:175)

When we go to a show and perform, it’s nerve wrecking, you know? Because most of us are just regular people. We’re all regular people, we’re not professionals, so not in a negative way, but it does make you nervous. But once you get over that nervousness and you begin saying your lines and you begin laughing a little, it’s fun, so like I said, I wouldn’t say it’s negative, but I would say there is nervousness which is troubling sometimes. (5:017)

The participants also discussed their sense that acting and performing allows for personal growth related to *self-expression and exploration of oneself*. They stated that this takes place in both in the rehearsal and performance settings, offering a new opportunity to express emotions and ideas. Participants who have also taken part in the Expressive Arts Therapy group at the Janet Wattles Center explained that this type of growth occurs both within the therapy group setting as well as *The Stars of Light*. In the following quote the artistic director of the troupe, who is also the leader of the Expressive Arts Therapy group, summarizes this repeating idea,

You’re going to learn how to connect with your body more. You’re going to learn how to speak and express in a way that’s going to be advantageous to you in the outside world. Those are the fringe benefits, I think. The icing on the package, so that you get a practical skills set for the everyday world. But through the act of observation of what’s outside and inside yourself, I think you begin to understand that. As you become conscious of your process,
which is what actors do, that’s when you have the first step to being able to obtain change. It’s hard to change something that you’re not conscious of, you know? So it’s a real interesting dance of letting go to let things emerge and then watching this process within yourself and going, “oh, that’s how I think. That’s how I feel. These are these moments that are happening all the time with me. Now, I can figure out maybe how to approach it in a different way.” And then you begin to gain control over that conscious/unconscious… flow that happens within us all the time. (3:022)

Another major thematic component of this emergent construct addresses the ways in which acting allows the troupe members an escape from the self. In contrast to the theme that addresses a deeper connection with oneself, here the participants explained how acting offers a distancing from the standard sense of self and inner struggles they experience on a regular basis. This theme is constructed from a complex grouping of repeating ideas. One of these is that portraying different characters on stage offers the troupe members a sense of freedom from their usual self,

And that’s what’s so appealing about acting though. Is that…anyone who loves to act…probably feels a sense of excitement from becoming somebody else, and making that person, making that character, whoever that may be, real. And to do that I get to leave Donna behind the curtain, and you know, not for long, I’ll be back, I’ll be back. Lord knows I’ll be back. You know not for long, but for long enough, to almost in my case, to breath…to just get out of there for just a little while and breath something new. And that’s very intrinsically rewarding. You don’t have to give me 5 bucks for that. I’ll give you 5 bucks. You know just let me breath. Thank you for letting me breath. If I were to say anything to the people who created this program, that’s probably what I’d say, Thank you for letting me breath. (7:154)
I know many people would think that it’s a lot of pressure getting on stage, but to me that’s like a vacation, because just every day life to me really kind of sucks. This is kind of like a comfort to me. (8:011)

However participants also commented that acting does not free them completely from their ongoing struggle and usual self. They still see themselves somewhat tethered to a part of them that monitors and judges what they are doing on stage,

I think acting in a way, even though I say I leave myself behind and become somebody else, there’s still that part of me that’s in there that wants not to fail. That part of you just drags along with you, no matter what you do. I couldn’t leave that behind if I tried. (7:175)

Another repeating idea emerged that troupe members feel that the energy they put into performance can bring freedom from troubling moods or symptoms,

If you’re acting it takes you out of yourself because you’re not you on the stage, you are the person you are portraying or the actor that you’re gonna be. I know we did the 3 Little Pigs and you had to be one of the three little pigs or the big bad wolf. You couldn’t be “Jim-I’m-Depressed-Day-person.” And you know when you’re on stage the energy it takes to act and to perform and make a good presentation overrides in most cases, overrides the depression. (9:095)

Participants shared that the alleviations of depression or other symptoms took place not only in performance, but also in the act of taking part in rehearsals. Repeatedly participants share experiences when felt their mood was greatly improved after a troupe rehearsal because they felt their energy and attention was pulled away from negative thoughts. Another repeating idea supporting this theme is that acting allows one to be more then they thought they were.

Participants described this in terms of appreciated ones ability to portray a character, as well as
the sense that in becoming someone else on stage they are pushing themselves to be and do more	hen they thought possible,

But creativity allows you to be someone you’re not. It allows you to act out a situation or
bring up a subject, however you want to express it…When you’re acting out a part, you’re not
only challenging yourself to be something other than you’re not or maybe to do things that
you wouldn’t allow yourself to really do. Like, me, it’s talking really loud or being really
animated in front of a large group of people. (1:026)

An addition aspect of this theme relates to gaining a sense of perspective in distancing from the
self. Similar to the previous repeating idea, participants explained this in terms of a greater
appreciation of personal abilities and talents,

The skits taught me a lot, too. The skits that we put on. I need to step outside of myself, be a
different character for once and think, “okay, my life isn’t too bad” and turn back to myself
and say, “I can do this. I just did this. I did a good job.” It’s because of Stars of Light and the
people who are in it that helped me become a better actor or role model for anybody that’s
watching that needs to look up to somebody. (5:144)

The third emergent theme that supports the construct, “Growing the Self and Escaping
from the Self” is that theatrical activities help growth of an artistic/actor identity. In
exploring this theme the participants explained that acting helps satisfy a personal desire for
identity growth,

I’ve learned a lot from being with the troupe these past two seasons. I’ve grown a lot myself.
I’ve found I’ve been able to sort of satisfy my own longing to get out there and be somebody
else. (7:017)
The participants explained that they find their artistic identity built from various activities with the troupe beyond acting,

For example, for artwork, there’s an art to drawing and to designing our sets and our props and our drops, but I also think there is some talent involved with putting together our children’s book, laying that out with the words and the pictures and the drawings. So I can be artistic in like a different way. I might not draw it, I might not write it, but I can have an impact with laying things out and setting things up and making sure things happen. (4:012) and they find that theatrical activities help bring out a “hidden” or “forgotten” artistic identity within them,

I’ve gained so much from acting, and writing, and art – and things that I never knew I had, or I never had the confidence to say it’s any good. And through the Stars of Light some of my material has been chosen, my art has been shown – and it brought out an actor in me. And those are some of the pleasures in life that a lot of people miss. (12:387)
Because the thing of it is that I’ve found myself, that, a person with mental illness has a lot of skills; if they’re developed a little bit, there’s an actor there, there’s an artist there, there’s a writer there, you know. And there’s somebody that’s really good at expressing their own story, in their own way. (9:240)
An additional idea that supports and expands this theme is that participants describe ways that building their artistic identity leads to an increase in self-worth,

I have a friend who yesterday was talking about – and she’s been in the troupe for quite a while, but has been out for a season – who said about her environmental past, “look at me today. I’m an actress. I’m A..B..C..D.” But the first thing she said is, “I’m an actress.” Being
in the troupe has allowed her to say that and to feel that pride in herself. And it’s a step in the
direction that she can say now “I love myself and I am worthy of that.” (12:063)

Theatrical Forms are Flexible and Inclusive. This emergent construct explores the various
elements of way The Stars of Light use, incorporate, and manipulate theatrical forms. The
overarching construct highlights the flexibility and inclusively of theater as an artistic modality,
and helps clarify troupe-level processes. In contrast to the inclusively discussed above (see
Developmental Processes) related to involvement and participation, here the inclusively
described by the actors relates to emotional expression and artistic content. Participants
described one major constituent theme addressing how they see an advantage of theatrical
activities encouraging emotional expressiveness. This theme arises from repeating ideas in the
data regarding the way theatrical activities activate participants emotionally. For one,
participants feel that acting allows them a different means of self expression than they are usually
accustomed, “but it’s interesting for me because it allows me to express myself in a different
way, and so, that’s cool.” (1:147)

If you’re expressing yourself in one way, I don’t think you’re really exploring yourself as
much as if you are taking on a different art form because you learn something so different
about yourself when you branch out to a different art form because you have to express it
differently. Theatre, I think, that allows me to actually act it out. (1:150)

In addition, participants repeatedly addressed the ways in which the emotional expression
involved in theatrical activities helped them bring back an expressiveness lost in the struggle
with mental illness. Here a participant shares how this idea relates to her ongoing struggle with
bipolar disorder,
Unmedicated, I have been to incredible heights like so many people with bipolar. You just …all of the characteristics that you own, the good characteristics, the positive characteristics and abilities seem to pour out of you – your humor, your productive, your creativity, your fearlessness, your ability to communicate with other people. Those are so magnified. And so we’ve reached such great heights and now being medicated sometimes we have to contend with - or resolve ourselves to be at a lesser tendency to reach those heights. So being in the troupe really helps us dig deep inside and still allow some of those abilities to come out and keep us in touch with that part of ourselves. (12:109)

However data also supports the idea that emotional expression in theatrical activities can be intense and require a heightened sensitivity among troupe members,

Just that some of the actors would really get too serious and it just seemed like they were on the verge of tears, but afterwards, they seemed to be just fine, but they just go so emotional. I don’t know if it was a good thing or not. (1:133)

This quote also highlights the repeating idea that the troupe setting is a safe environment for emotional expression and exploration, and that an emotional “build-up” and “come-down” often accompanies performance activities.

Another constituent theme emerged addressing the ways in which the troupe’s theatrical activities are flexible and malleable. Narrative and archival data help explain how the troupe adjusts the artistic form and content to fit individual and troupe needs. This theme emerged from several repeating ideas. One idea addresses how the troupe is able to adjust to individual member needs on stage. One of the most commonly addressed issues where adjustment is called for regards participants difficulty memorizing scripted lines for live performance, “you either
improvise or you peek on a sheet or you ask, ‘hey, what’s the next line? What’s the next line?’ It’s fun though” (5:023).

The troupe’s managing director explains it this way,

Half of them aren’t going to memorize their roles. We figure out some creative way that if they need to have something, whether it’s a book or a clipboard or a music stand, that they can refer back to it. Some of it is their nervousness, some of it is their illness. They have memory problems. I have memory problems memorizing roles….that would probably be the biggest thing we do. We don’t make people memorize all their lines. We give them little props to use. (4:326)

Other repeating ideas emerged explaining how individual member interest and abilities are incorporated into the troupe’s artistic content. For example, the troupe’s performances often include instrumental and/or vocal music, depending on the interests and motivations of individual members,

Well my songs that I’ve written are mostly autobiographical and especially the first one that I wrote was really autobiographical. And so I guess I did think of myself as trying to let everybody know what I’ve gone through. (10:054)

Another idea shared by participants is that the troupe’s adjustments to shifts in membership influence artistic content. Here, the artistic director explains how this occurs and his role in the process,

That flexibility thing where you have to adjust. It’s like, so-and-so is no longer here now…That changes the equation. And we’ve got three new people, so here’s what they’re capable of. Here is what their gifts are, you know? [Troupe member] was new in the last year and she’s very verbal, she’s very intelligent, and she’s very talented. And so, it’s like, well,
I’m going to try to—just as a theatre group—how do I start tailoring some stuff to her abilities and needs? (3:169)

The standard format for *The Stars of Light’s* live performances involves two general components. One component is the original, scripted “skit” material that is performed by the ensemble, and the other component is the personal stories or testimonials shared by individual troupe members. These components are mixed together in various ways to create the performance structure, and often times the troupe members sharing stories shifts depending on the performance. Another repeating idea that relates to flexibility and inclusion on the individual level is that *not all members tell their personal stories in live performance*. All members are encouraged to consider sharing a story, but the choice is left up to the individual,

Well when we tell our stories, not everyone has one and not everybody’s done one. Because they might not be ready for that specific part. But [artistic director] was always encouraging you know “just write it down, see what you’d say.” (6:111)

This show we are doing now is only the first time I’ve ever actually done a story…I don’t know, I’ve just never felt the desire to do it. (11:119)

An additional theme that supports this theoretical construct addresses the themes and tenor of the artistic content presented by the troupe. The participants shared a great deal about the way *comedy and drama are blended together* in the troupe’s performance material. Data indicates that *various factors influence the choice of when to humorous or more serious content is presented*. One factor is the choice of the individual troupe member who writes a skit or segment of the production. The troupe seems to respect their will and motivation, and the content of the performance is designed to incorporate the material. Another factor is the input of the troupe directors. The artistic director especially plays a primary role in structuring the
performance, and deciding on the comedic or dramatic “beats” of the show. Another factor emerged from the data that involves an appreciation of the overall theme, artistic motif, or context of the performance,

   We just look at the content. We look at the context of what our topic is. We look at the time frame that we’re going to work with. And then we say, “ok, we know the humor is the thing we want to work with because humor is always a good pie to serve.” But we want them [the audience] to know that there are obstacles, and pain and suffering as well. (7:179)

Another repeating idea emphasizes the ways in which dramatic content can convey the real struggle of mental illness, “through some of the skits that we do are—some are serious and that brings people closer and to how serious mental illness is” (5:044).

One participant shared her desire to see more inclusion of dramatic material in this way,

   If you mix the two, I think that it becomes more realistic. Because comedy tends to, you know, people do not take it as seriously. They may think about it, but I don’t think comedy can really capture people’s thoughts as much as drama can. I would like to see the troupe taking on a serious role what really happens when someone…has a breakdown and see them recover. I think that would help with our message a lot. I don’t know about making the whole show a dramatic thing, but just have a scene, throw something in there that hits home more. The stories of stigma help, but to actually dramatize it, I think would help audiences a lot to see what could happen. (1:067)

Data supports that this kind of input from troupe members is what leads to continued changes in the formulation and execution of future live performances.

**Benefits and Challenges of Sharing Personal Stories.** A third emergent construct relates to effects of including member’s personal stories as performance material within the live
performances. Data indicate that personal stories are presented in a semi-structured way during the live performances; in that they range from being completely written out to being completely improvised around a topic or story. Troupe members are generally asked to keep their stories to five minutes in order to include other scripted content within the thirty-minute time structure of the performances. Participants explained the benefits of including these personal stories as well as some of the complexities and challenges that arise as part of the process.

One of the primary themes that emerged from the data supporting this construct is members sense that personal stories are the most powerful element for audiences. Although no archival data or audience survey data was available to support this claim, this theme was repeatedly emphasized in narrative data. Participants feel that the power of the stories lies in the sharing of real experiences, as opposed to fictional scenarios,

I think the personal stories… People love the personal stories. They’re not too long….Everyone is pretty tight with their diction so, they say a lot in just a little bit of time, and uh…that’s pretty much how we try to let them know this is real. We’re laughing and we’re having some fun, sharing some information with you, but this is real. (7:185)

Another repeating idea emerged that personal stories are especially powerful because they grab the audience’s attention,

When people do their personal stories. I think that is something that people pay attention to a lot. And I think it’s because it’s in the context of the whole show, and then somebody starts telling somebody in their own words about a part of their life. I think people really get into that…I think that just kind of stops…and people really pay attention to that I think. It’s a very real experience. You know it’s very raw. (10:156)
Participants see the inclusion of personal stories in the troupe’s performances as powerful and important. Sharing personal stories with audiences was generally reported to be a rewarding and meaningful experience that gets easier the more it is done on stage. However some of the challenges experienced by participants relate to deciding what and how much to share, deciding how much to read from a prepared text, overcoming fears, and keeping their story to only a few minutes. One of the themes that emerged addresses the challenges of self-disclosure. One repeating idea within this theme is that each member must decide prior to, and during performances, the extent they feel comfortable disclosing details of their personal lives,

Of course, when we go up there and people ask us questions, we don’t have to answer them. We don’t have to give everything out either. So I think that should be an option to the troupe of how much they want to expose. They just have to be told, you know, “don’t say anything you don’t want to come back and haunt you sometime later.” But know that you’re out there, you might be helping somebody. (1:129)

Here the motivation to impact the community is negotiated with an instinct toward personal safety and privacy. Participants shared that a certain amount of planning occurs prior to a performance, but they must also decide in the moment how much to disclose during the post-performance talk back session. A related repeating idea regarding self-disclosure emerged that addresses how troupe members sometimes share details of their present emotional state,

I’ve had times where I’ve been on stage where I’ve said, “you know this depression is really bad and I’m going through a bad time right now. If I seem kind of down, it’s because I am.”…But I have to go on, you know. And this helps me go on. And it also brings more of an impact because I’m being honest, that we have our days and they’re gonna come…So, when I’m being blue, I want people also to see I really am blue and I am having problems and that
it’s a fact that it’s not something that I have a script for that I’m doing, that it’s a fact and it’s true and it happens. And it’s happening now. (9:096)

In addition to feelings of depression, participants also shared that they enjoy telling the audiences how pleased they feel to connect and have the chance to perform. Observational data supports this idea, as well as the idea that actors often share aspects of the personal growth processes addressed above during talk backs.

An addition theme emerged that helps clarify the ways actors handle the emotional impact of sharing personal stories in performance. Participants repeatedly expressed that telling personal narratives to audiences can involve unpleasant emotional reactions within themselves, specifically related to a “reliving” of painful aspects of their past,

There’s been times when telling my story has brought up some pretty bad things….when I really get into talking about the really dark and painful things, I actually have to go there, and that’s hard to deal with. And if you happen to be a little depressed, then you start to talk about the really depressed things, it gets really hard. And there’s other times when different people, they just can’t tell their story that day, because it will take them there, and the don’t want to go there. (9:196)

This quote again highlights the ways that actors decide prior to the performance what they feel emotionally prepared to do in the performance. Although the telling of stories can be emotionally trying participants repeatedly emphasized the positive emotions they feel in sharing with audiences, as well as the idea that telling their personal narrative on stage gets easier with more experience. The managing director shares her observations of this over the years in this way,

I think the people love it and need it. They’re very skittish about it in the beginning. They’re so worried people won’t like them or accept them, or will stutter or think that they’re odd. But
once they get up there and do it and they come back, they’re like, “whew! It’s over! And you know what? It wasn’t that bad after all.” Pretty soon, we’re cutting their stories down because instead 3-to-5 minutes, they could go on forever. (4:184)

Narrative data indicated that *actors experience the sharing of their personal stories in different ways*. Whereas one troupe member may feel very connected to the emotional content of their story on stage, other members may feel a sense of detachment from their story,

It just feels like any other piece you’re doing, really, cause I mean, for me I kind of detach myself from it…It’s just like doing a skit kind of, it’s not really… well, I know it’s about me.

I guess the point is that you’re doing it so many times, it becomes detached. (11:127)

Differences in emotional connection to one’s story also impacts the *actors experience shifting from their real self to a fictional character*. Whereas some participants do not feel this shift is very jarring, others find this transition to be emotionally taxing,

Another challenge was to be able to put on the actors role, and get out of myself and get into my character. Or go from a character into me. Because there’s a big transition there. And there’s fun, and jolliness in the scripts, and then to go from that and switch over to the, “hey I want you to hear this story and I want you to understand my pain and suffering, and my successes and my regrets,” and you know all that stuff. You know it’s really hard to change those gears; and in 30 minutes you may have to do that a couple of times. (9:171)

**Talkbacks Serve Multiple Ends.** Offering an audience the opportunity to interact with performers and directors, ask questions, and make comments is a widely used format in theatrical settings. *The Stars of Light* make a consistent effort to include such a “talkback” after each of their live performances. The format used by the troupe is an open forum discussion beginning with a short introduction by the troupe’s director(s) and each of the actors. Data indicate that
these talk backs serve multiple ends; impacting both actors and audiences in a variety of ways. One of the supportive themes to this construct addresses the **emotional connection felt between the actors and the audience members**. Participants indicated that this emotional link is often experienced as a *one-to-one connection* between an actor and a particular audience member,

One was a little boy the last show we did. He really loved our show and it was really cool to talk to him. He kind of fell in love with [a troupe member], our guitarist. He was like his #1 fan. So, it was just kind of cute. And his parents were very interested in what we do and how we manage or, what programs are out there for them. (6:046)

Participants repeatedly shared that these connections are felt both during the talkback discussions, and after the shows when audience members and actors regularly carry on individual follow-up conversations. Another repeating idea emerged that these *connections with audiences* involve an emotional give and take that affect both people,

You could almost see tears in some of the people who were listening to it…So it’s like—and when we were done, there were people donating $20, $50, $30 to us just because of that experience. And so, for me, that was a big—I’ve never seen anything like that. Because it’s kind of embarrassing just to give your soul out like that, to admit such things as alcoholism, suicide. And then, after the performance was over, you’ve seen just how much that touched the people and they would come up to you and say, “you know, I know somebody that committed suicide from depression.” And so, you realize, “wow. We’re doing something good here.” So that was a big experience for me. (1:041)

This quote highlights the impact that these emotional connections with audience members have on the actors’ sense of impacting the community. Furthermore this theme emphasizes the
connection between the theatrical formats and methods used by the troupe and the themes related to social activism addressed above.

Another significant emergent theme related to the outcome of talkbacks is that these interactions allow the troupe to get feedback from audiences. Narrative and observational data indicate that talk backs allow the actors to learn of the cognitive and emotional impact the live performance is having on the audience members, as well as which parts of the performance were most powerful, moving, or entertaining. One of the most repeated supporting ideas of this theme is that feedback during talkbacks clarifies the emotional impact on audiences,

Even though during the performance I’d seen that person and it didn’t seem like I was getting through to them, but it’s afterwards, especially the question-and-answers that are after the performances. Because, when we get off the stage, when we’re out in the audience… you’re able to talk to the audience. And I think that’s an important part. That’s how I know I’ve reached them. (1:031)

Especially after that last show where we had the talkback. After the show was done, everybody that I talked to in the group, they just felt so good about what they did and they said, “wow! We touched a lot of people. Did you hear what they said? This person said this and that to me.” I think it made us feel good, better than any other shows that we’ve done because we had that chance to have that opportunity. I think it makes people feel good about themselves and what they’re doing. (1:187)

This second quote highlights another significant repeating idea; that participants feel the interaction and discussion they have within the troupe processing the audience interactions helps solidify a sense of success and impact. In addition, participants shared that they can regularly sense both verbal and non-verbal forms of feedback from audience members during talkbacks,
It’s a very personal thing that happens, and it doesn’t need to span a long period of time or to take a lot of conversation. Even, it’s just a look, a nod of the head. Just there’s so many ways that you can get feedback from an audience when you’re trying to present something to them. (7:029)

Narrative data also suggests that talkbacks allow actors to pay closer attention to audiences to pick up on such cues, compared with the limited attention they can give during the live performance.

The troupe members explored another theme related to the talkbacks that addresses this notion of paying attention to audiences. Data indicate that talkbacks allow the actors to sense differences in audience factors. Participants addressed difference in audience factors in a variety of contexts during data collection. One idea is that audience size influences the talkback experience, “but some of our best talkbacks have been from a handful of people, because they’re there and they want to learn.” (9:216)

Then we’d give them information and stuff, and there was a lot of questions and answers in regards to that type of situation. And a lot of people really enjoyed that, probably because it was more on an interpersonal level because it was a small group. (6:175)

Just as these quotes highlight the benefit of small groups, participants also felt that some of the larger audiences were not as intimate a setting and that there my be some social pressure to stay quiet and not stand out by asking a question. Another audience factor that seems to have an effect on talkbacks is the level of audience self-disclosure.

And sometimes there are conversations that get pretty deep…and you feel like you started something. It makes you uncomfortable with what people reveal, and so, especially hearing about suicides. It’s like, “oh, my gosh,” you know?...Like, “why are you sharing this with
me?” So it’s like it not only gives us a chance to share, it seems to be that it’s giving the audience a chance…because I don’t know if most people have that moment where they can come across a stranger and say, “your show, your story, had really touched me. This is what happened to me.” And that could be a release for the people in the audience, too. (1:205)

Whereas some audiences are very eager to open up and share experiences with the troupe, others are less willing to either share personal experiences or ask questions. Participants also shared that even one audience member self-disclosing in powerful way can have a significant impact on the emotional quality of the talkback.

An additional and related theme that emerged regarding talkbacks is how these post-performance discussions enhance the performance experience of the audience. This theme is constructed from two repeating ideas. First, that the audience gets to hear more personal narratives from the actors spontaneously during the talkback discussion. Often, even if a troupe member chooses not to share their personal story during the performance, they feel comfortable to do so during the talkback, “since people are telling their story, other people in the troupe will share in the talkback, but audience people will as well.” (4:187)

I think that when it comes to the Q&A, just some of the questions, some of them are very good. And I feel that I’ve always had something to input in terms of the Q&A. I don’t know if it’s because of my age and my life experiences, but it’s just that during the Q&A it seems like people are more willing and open to like hear what you have to say. And then when you’re done, the people come up to you and talk to you about it. (6:041)

Another repeating idea that supports this theme is that troupe members feel audience members do not get as much out of the performance experience when talkbacks do not occur.
They can ask questions and get a personal view from one of us. I think that really clicks with them. When we don’t, it’s kind of like, well, “we’ve had this nice show, we’ve enjoyed the humor, we got a couple of the points.” I just don’t think it has quite the impact. (2:059)

Data suggest that talkbacks sometimes do not occur if there are unexpected time constraints or logistical concerns that arise on the day of the performance. However, due to the established norm of their inclusion and the benefits of actor-audience interactions discussed above; troupe members are often eager to interact with audience members even when no formal talkback is held.

**Audience factors influence impact and actor experiences.** This emergent construct continues to examine the influence of audience factors. Participants highlighted differences in audience factors such as age, type of host organization/setting, and mental health consumer vs. non-consumer. The extent to which audiences present as responsive, interested, biased, etc. seems to influence the sense that the performance was successful in achieving its goals, as well as the internal experience for the actors. One of the supporting themes of this construct is that **audience expectations and attitudes influence performance impact.** Participants repeatedly shared that they find the type of **audience setting influences attitudes** of both actor and audience,

The hardest thing for me to perform is in front of a crowd that is forced there. Because they’re closed. You know, “we have to be here. We’re closed,” and…you know the dinner crowd, performing in front of people who are eating is kind of hard too because they’re not really focused. After they’re eating, maybe. And not so before because they’re like “hmm, I can smell that roast beef out there.” You know. I like schools. I like to go to conventions if we’re not their dinner entertainment. I don’t like that because I just don’t feel we have the
impact. But if we’re in a breakout session, or starting a session or something, that’s a little different. (9:155)

This quote emphasizes not only the impact of audience setting on audience attention and attitude, but also the impact on the actors assumptions about the audience. Data indicate that this has a qualitative impact on the actors sense of the show’s success. Another repeating idea emerged that theater audiences’ energy is tied to their anticipation of entertainment. Here the participants drew on their own experiences watching theater as well as performing with the troupe. The participants shared their perceptions that this type of anticipation can build the energy and impact of the performances, “I think it’s just the not knowing, the expectation, the anticipation of being kind of pampered, and catered to, by people who are really charged by what they’re doing. It’s exciting.” (7-197), but also expressed some frustration with audiences who assume The Stars of Light are solely meant to be a form of entertainment, rather than a presentation designed to challenge social attitudes about mental illness,

I think some groups use this as sort of a cheap form of entertainment, and they’re not really that interested in what the message is… I think some of them don’t know what it’s about.

And…we’re just…a vaudeville act….Some of the groups, the audience doesn’t know what the message is going to be before we get there. (11:661)

This idea emphasizes the ongoing challenge experienced by the troupe of balancing the dual desire to entertain audiences, but also engage them and educate them simultaneously. Adjusting to mixed expectations of audience members is part of this challenge.

In addition to audience expectations, another theme emerged from the data that addresses the influence of audience reactions on the performance impact and actors experience.

Participants shared that part of the theatrical performance process is reading and reacting to
mixed audience responses to the show’s content. This theme highlights the many ways that actors react to audience reactions during the actual performance, rather than after the performance as addressed above. The actors shared experiences of feeling disappointed with audience reactions,

When you’re up there on stage and its like, they’re just sitting there in the audience. And it’s just like, “man this is awkward.” Like you get up there and tell a joke…it’s like the cricket sound, you know. Pins drop. And it’s like, “oh brother, here we go.” This is rough. Tough crowd. (8:119)

As well as many experiences where they felt that audiences expressed positive reactions to the performance content,

I know when I’ve personally impacted an audience when you can look into the eyes of certain people in the audience and you can just see and sense a feeling about them. Sometimes there’s like a glisten or a twinkle in the eye. Sometimes it’s a little smirk, like, “hey, that was endearing,” or “that was funny,” or “I understand.” Definitely by laughter. You know you’ve impacted people by laughter or even…sometimes they’ll go, “hmmm” or they’ll gasp or they’ll make a little noise that lets you know that they’re thinking something about what’s going on. (5:025)

These themes help clarify the complexities of presenting live theatrical performances to a wide variety of audiences in the community. Narrative data suggest that one of the central elements of performing live theater in the setting of The Stars of Light is adjusting to both the unique audience factors that arise, but also their internal reactions to these audience factors.

**Challenges of Rehearsal/Production Process Involve Individual and Setting Factors.** Another theoretical construct emerged regarding characteristics of theater that speaks to the various
challenges that arise to the rehearsal and production process of the troupe. Data suggest that these challenges involve both individual and setting factors. Here the levels of analysis move from the community-level as seen above regarding audience factors, to the individual and troupe levels. At the individual level, a theme emerged that explains the various ways participants see actors’ personal challenges in the acting and performing context. One of the repeating ideas within this theme is that actors in the troupe often worry about their effectiveness as an actor.

When we go to a show and perform, it’s nerve wrecking, you know? Because most of us are just regular people. We’re all regular people, we’re not professionals, so not in a negative way, but it does make you nervous. (5:017)

An often repeated idea in the data is that actors individually struggle to memorize lines for performances,

There’s times that we’ve worked in rehearsal, where we’ve gone over one line, with me myself, just over and over and over, to get it right. Because it just wasn’t clicking, and it might be as simple as two words. But they’re not in the right combination. I mean we’ve had to work on it. (9:175)

I’d say the worst thing that would happen while we’re performing would be to forget our lines and that can be embarrassing. I mean, it’s happened I’m sure to everyone that’s been in the group, it’s happened to me, forget your lines and you’re like, you know, you get a little embarrassed. (5:019)

A related idea emerged that bridges the individual and troupe level, wherein the actors work together to adjust to individual challenges such as forgetting a line,

I’ve had the whole troupe going backstage before we’re going on, going over the lines with me to make sure I get them correctly. So, yeah, there’s a big problem with that, and luckily
everybody’s willing to read the lines, or backstage willing to say “it’s your turn.” Or “now remember to take your hat off,” or, cause we did The Emperor’s New Voices, and there’s a lot of costuming changes, there’s a lot of mics handing off, when we don’t have enough. I’m very fortunate that I can project. You know if a mic is missed for me it’s usually I can boost it up enough that everybody hears me. Where other people you have to be backstage coaching them to force it a little more, you know, “these people can’t hear ya.”...A couple of our people, are really soft spoken...so we got to make sure they get the right mic. (9:175)

Participants expressed that a mix of both team work and a sense of dealing with common struggles helps each individual actor manage these challenges better on stage. Another repeating idea within this theme is that many actors experience some form of emotional come-down after live performances. Data suggest this experience can be somewhat stressful, but that it soon passes, and that discussing emotional reactions with other troupe member is helpful,

Sometimes when we do something big there’s a little bit of a let down. There’s all this time, all this energy concentrated on this thing and then, you know, you get dropped off at home and it’s like “bye. Ok.” And so...I just kind of personally regroup after that.....Usually I’ll try to sleep. Or take a little walk with [my dog]. Take him out to go to the bathroom. There’s been a few times when I’ve called [the artistic director] and I’ve said that I had Post-Dramatic Stress Disorder. [laugh] (10:120)

An additional idea that emerged is that actors can find it challenging to access and manage emotions that arise during performances when they must access difficult personal stories or memories,
Getting angry at my family. That would be tough for me because I wouldn’t want to do that over again. Yeah. Getting angry with my family….True emotions. True emotions is hard to get back into. (5:335)

This point is addressed above as well in relation to sharing aspects of ones’ personal story during performance.

Another theme emerged that supports the larger theoretical construct that explains **challenges at the troupe level**. The process of rehearsing and performing live theater in the context of *The Stars of Light* appears to involve a variety of challenges that are experienced as a group rather than solely within the individual. One repeating idea emerged that *logistical challenges arise regularly*. As discussed in the previous constructs related to Developmental Processes, these logistical challenges are primarily dealt with by the troupe members, but often involve accommodation and adjustment from all troupe members. Here the managing director explains the logistical challenges of being a small traveling theater troupe,

Well, limitations are the logistics. You’ve got to pack it up. You’ve got to take it along…I mean from, you gotta wash those shirts again, to load up the van and gas up the van again. I think that’s one of the downfalls. It’s not just that we’re live, we’re mobile. We’re a traveling theatre troupe. We’re not just a theatre troupe that has a theatre somewhere and people are just going to come and see us. There’s a lot more work involved, you know, than the people who are going to show up at *Wicked* tonight and put on a great show because they didn’t have to drive there, they didn’t have to make sure their costume was washed, they didn’t have to set it up and take it down and load it up when they’re done. They just walk right off the stage. It’s a big difference for any traveling troupe. (4:189)
Another repeating idea emerged that *specialized roles can be hard to share*. Whereas the scripted, structured, 30-minute performances generally allow for other troupe members to easily step in to cover for a missing actor, occasionally actors take on specialized roles that require more preparation and knowledge,

That’s gonna be a real challenge because no one really practices the …the sound effect guy. And I never really knew how difficult it was, because last year we had some sound effects that someone else did, and you think, “oh well, they just squeeze a thing, and do a thing,” Oh no! It’s got to be done right and it’s got to be done on time, and you have to remember a lot of stuff. (9:180)

An additional idea that emerged within this theme of troupe-level challenges regards how the *troupe must adjust to members who are not stable enough to take part* in terms of symptoms of mental illness or daily functioning. Here the artistic director shares an experience with an actor that expresses this idea,

We realized that he hadn’t been taking medication, he hadn’t been doing the thing, and we had to tell him, “you can’t be in the troupe right now.” There are times where somebody’s been drinking. That’s happened. It was like you can’t be in a show about recovery if you’re not in recovery. And it got kind of ugly, you know, scary for a minute or two. That was hard for me and that’s part of my learning process. You end up getting tossed stuff that are hard things. Somehow life always throws those things at you that are the hardest. (3:119)

Data suggest that the troupe’s standard rehearsal and performance structure involves a brief rehearsal within a few days of every live performance. This not only allows for a refreshing of actors confidence about the performance, but also allows the directors a chance to address
challenges such as this, and learn if any actors do not feel prepared to take part in any aspect of the performance.

An additional emerging theme further clarifies the ways in which challenges within the troupe involve both individual and setting-level processes. Here challenges involving interpersonal dynamics emerged. This theme involves the idea that interpersonal conflict and struggle occur from time to time during the rehearsal and performance process. Participants shared that this occasionally involves personality conflicts, “I might’ve heard a couple of things about somebody not being happy with somebody else in the Troupe” (2:153). But is most often something seen as inherent in any theatrical setting where original works are being created and performed,

Trying, working incredibly hard and dissecting and disagreeing and tugging and pulling and stuff that I think the best theatre does at a professional level... I’m willing to let the Stars - I try to urge them to own that stuff and go, “no. I wrote this. I want this. I think this is funny.” (3:171)

Here the artistic director expresses that this challenge in fact ends up creating stronger works of art for the stage. Although disagreement over content takes place occasionally, he feels actors should fight for what they feel is important to include in the performance. Participants also expressed the idea that troupe members occasionally feel disappointment in another actor’s level of commitment. As the actors’ level of involvement and interest in troupe activities vary this disappointment seems to arise due to an imbalance among the troupe members,

Sometimes like if some people feel like they’re doing more than others. Like people feel like they’re trying harder than others. And sometimes that will cause a conflict. Like, “wait a
minute, you’re not holding up your end of the deal.” So that can make it tough once in a while. (8:460)

This idea also appears to be tied to the notion that the troupe’s growth and success over time has caused some members expectations to rise regarding an acceptable level of commitment among the performers. “Commitment” in this case involves not only a sense of energy put into the presentation of a character, but also a general willingness to contribute to rehearsals and live performances. The data does not indicate that actors are in conflict on a regular basis, or that actors regularly drop out of the troupe because of interpersonal conflicts.

**Unique Characteristics of Theater as an Art Form.** A final theoretical construct emerged that addresses the characteristics of the theater art form participants feel make it a unique means of engaging both participants and the general public. Interview and focus group data presented several supporting themes within this construct, as participants shared their experience and perspectives on this topic. Data suggest that participants feel theatrical activities have many things in common with other artistic activities; including a means of self-expression and sharing one’s voice and experience with audiences. However several themes emerged that address the unique characteristics of theatrical forms. One emergent theme suggests that theater is unique in it’s level of **direct contact** involved. One of the repeating ideas within this theme addresses the physical connectedness involved in theatrical forms. Participants discussed the power of actors’ **proximity to the audience** and who this proximity allows for a strong connection,

They can look into your eyes basically cause they’re right in front of you. Most of the time the crowds are so thin – I mean small – that we’re right on top of them, so they’re looking right us, so they can see your expressions and stuff. (11:511)
This idea relates directly to the themes addressed above regarding audience factors and the mutual influence of actor and audience. Participants also shared that the power of the contact between performers and the audience is tied to the strength of the live performance experience. Several reported a therapeutic connection between actor and audience,

Because I’ve noticed…depending on the reaction from the audience, we’ll have a totally different impact of what’s on that stage. If they’re really involved in it and they’re laughing, it’s like a therapy for both. It’s like there’s—it’s connected. It’s not really we’re up here on the stage, you’re just there to watch us. There is a lot of what you call going back and forth—connection. There’s a connect there. (1:027)

Another supporting idea of this theme that emerged from the narrative data suggests that theater more than other art forms allows for a personal engagement with the public. You’re reaching out using a different medium. It’s taken more personal because of the fact that you’re acting out a person. You’re not just telling a story, you’re acting out somebody. (1:143)

Theater is a very different kind of expression I think, in that it puts all of you out there. Where as writing I can sit at my computer and with nobody around, and even put the book out or the poetry out there and it’s still not all of me. I’m safe to some degree from the anxiety that I might feel being in front of the people. But then I don’t grow either. I might grow as a writer. I might grow as…a painter…but theater puts you out there and makes you be accountable in a way that other artistic pursuits don’t I think….you have to give yourself voice. (7:175)

Here the emphasis is on the depth of personal engagement and artistic ownership. This second quote highlights the connection made by participants between the power of theatrical activities to
engage the public, and simultaneously engage a process of artistic identity development that is influenced by that engagement.

Another emergent theme also addresses the idea of connection and engagement inherent in theater activities. Participants emphasized that theatrical activities are unique due to the social interaction that they involve. Besides the interaction with audiences addressed above, a repeating idea emerged that theater involves a group interaction and mutual support process. Participants repeatedly discussed this idea when contrasting theatrical activities with other artistic activities,

When I was doing the performance for *The Stars of Light* in front of all those people, somehow it [the fear] was gone…So, I was like, is it the character or is it the group, the unity that we have? Whereas, as a poet, you’re standing up there by yourself. You have no one to talk to afterwards or someone to congratulate you after you’re done, so that was a big thing for me. That whole experience. The fact that I could be up on that stage and act in front of all those people and not feel that fear that I used to feel when I was giving poetry readings alone. (1:040)

Another idea supporting this theme emerged that characterized theater as a social process. In contrast, participants discussed other art forms as more isolated and focused on and within the individual,

The whole process is more socially….you’re in more of a social mode than if… you could do painting by yourself, and it’s kind of isolating maybe, if you’re not doing it in a group….I mean painting’s creative and everything but it’s not like you’re really in contact with other people if you’re doing it in your house or whatever…. It’s creative, but it’s not really socializing with people. It’s not interacting with people maybe. (11:559)
A theme also emerged suggesting that theater is unique in that it **demands attention** to a greater degree than other art forms. Participants repeatedly addressed the differences between live theater and television, and other performance arts such as music. Drawing on their past experiences with other art forms, they described *theater forms as more engaging than other performance forms*,

Well the one thing that comes to mind is that the audience is tracking more with what we’re doing. And when I played before in bars or open mic nights, places, you know it’s like people sort of drop in and out of paying attention. And here they’re kind of hanging on every word. So there’s a lot of, I guess, hopefully…they’re really focusing in on what we’re saying.

(10:104)

This idea supports the other themes discussed above regarding the troupe’s desire to grab the attention of, and influence the hearts and minds of audiences in the community. Participants reported that theater offers the best means of achieving this goal, due to the power of the art form and its appeal with the general public. Another related idea emerged from the data that suggests that *theatrical arts demand more presence and attention* of audiences than other formats such as video,

Put it right there in front of their faces. They can’t close their eyes. That’s what’s so wonderful, I think, about live theatre. It’s right there. What are you going to do? Close your eyes while it’s going on? It’s not like a TV where you could turn it off or a DVD where you could fast forward. There it is. (4:176)
Here participants emphasized that theater forces one to be present in witnessing activities on a stage, more so than when watching a two-dimensional presentation on a screen. This is supporting by the archival data, in that the troupe has put the majority of it’s energies into producing live performances over the past 15 years, rather than video-tapes presentations for distribution.

Finally, the archival data and field notes indicate that another unique element of theatrical activities is that they are broad enough and flexible enough to include other art forms. This is addressed to some degree in other constructs and themes presented above. Over the years of their work together *The Stars of Light* has incorporated vocal and instrumental music, visual art, and poetry into their live performances. The troupe presents a living example of how these other forms of expression can be included within a larger theatrical presentation. Persons living with psychiatric disabilities are therefore offered the opportunity to express themselves in a variety of ways in the context of a community performance.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter is designed to accomplish two goals. First, I explore the theoretical constructs that emerged from findings; indentifying connections, contrasts, and expansions of ideas presented in previous research. Graphical models are also presented to integrate findings and build connections to established theory and previous literature. In the second section of this chapter I explore the process of partnering with *The Stars of Light* and moving through the various stages of the present study. The inquiry process is addressed first, with special emphasis on entry into the research partnership, navigating relationships with participants, and the experience of witnessing the participants’ experiences within the data. Next I highlight several key points regarding the process of conducting interviews, the focus group, and meeting with the troupe for member checking of data. Finally, the third section of this chapter addresses limitations to the present research, followed by specific recommendations for social and professional settings.

Developmental Processes and Outcomes

Qualitative analysis generated six primary theoretical constructs related to developmental processes of *The Stars of Light* as a setting for people with psychiatric disabilities, as well as individual troupe members. Given the overlap between the six constructs, the following section will discuss the constructs in terms of three broader theoretical ideas: 1) Mutual influence of individuals and the troupe, 2) Involvement, identity development and recovery process, and 3) Community connections and community impacts. The purpose of the following discussion is to explore the interactions of the individual, troupe, and community levels of analysis, and connect and compare findings from the present study to previous research and theory. A central issue that
runs throughout these findings is the description of both developmental processes and outcomes of these processes. The emergent constructs present a picture of a troupe with 15 years of history behind it, but one that is constantly in flux and continues to develop. Therefore trajectories of development and change are explored, as well as the products of these trajectories for the troupe as a whole, its individual members, and the wider Rockford, Illinois community.

*Mutual Influence of Individuals and the Troupe*

Findings of this study describe a process of dynamic interaction between the individual participants personal development and the troupe’s development. This interaction is far from simple or one directional however. The story of *The Stars of Light* exemplifies how individual life trajectories, development of an inclusive setting, and various contextual factors surrounding individuals and a setting all influence one another. First, the emergent constructs “Stability of Form Helps Flexibility of Involvement” and “Troupe Flexibility Enhances Sustainability and Personal Growth” both address how the stable rehearsal, performance, and interactional patterns of the troupe, as well as the seemingly paradoxical idea that great openness and flexibility can exist within a stable setting structure. The troupe’s flexibility to allow various degrees of consistent involvement, as well as its ability to adjust to challenges posed in the logistical and artistic realms, become something that members can count on. There appears to be an openness that allows intermittent involvement, combined with troupe norms that encourage both creative and problem solving input from members. This combination simultaneously sends the message that members are critical to troupe functioning, but the troupe can survive without any one member.

A great deal was learned about individual trajectories of troupe members through the various types of data collection in this study. A dynamic picture emerged involving various
individual and ecological factors explaining how people with psychiatric disabilities living in the Rockford area enter the troupe, and navigate troupe involvement. Figure 5.1 below presents a visual schematic of this dynamic process. Several key points regarding individual trajectories are presented here.

First, the four central means of entry by which troupe members learn about the troupe and get involved are: previous involvement in the Expressive Arts Therapy group, word of mouth within social and treatment networks, a personal invitation from a current troupe member or director, and via suggestion from another Janet Wattles clinician or staff member. The process of troupe entry appears to be simple. After speaking personally with one of the troupe’s directors, the interested person attends a rehearsal, meets other members, and begins taking part. The Stars of Light is not a structured treatment program within the Janet Wattles Agency, therefore formal follow up and charting within treatment teams is not necessary. However, an informal communication network between troupe members, directors, other consumers and agency staff seems to drive the flow of new consumers to the troupe.

Second, the arrows in the figure represent directions of influence. Since the relationships between various factors are not quantified, identifying the weights or statistical strength of the relationships is beyond the scope of the present study. However, much can be gleaned from this schematic nonetheless. Some directions of influence seem to be unidirectional, such as the evidence that members having an increase in free, unstructured time in their schedule allows for re-entry back into the troupe. There is no evidence from the present data that suggests that this increase in free time leads to troupe members dropping out. In contrast, several bi-directional relationships arose. Looking at the example of the triangular interaction of “mental health
Figure 5.1

Factors Influencing Entry and Involvement in Troupe

Personal struggles related to severe and chronic mental illness have repeatedly affected the troupe members’ ability to find and maintain employment. This interaction is well documented in previous research (Cook, 2006; Cunningham, Wolbert & Brockmeier, 2000; Drain et al., 2002), especially related to supported employment initiatives (Drake et al., 1996) and employment playing an important role in recovery (Bond et al., 2001, Noordsy et al., 2002). A troupe member may find that their mental health struggles and symptoms lead them to have to
leave a job. This in turn may lead them to take part in the troupe from a desire to fill their time with a meaningful activity. After some period of time, improvements in mental health struggles and personal recovery may open a door for regular employment, that pressures their schedule in a way that forces them to leave the troupe. Conversely, if there is an increase in symptoms or struggles, the member may have to leave temporarily to prioritize more extensive treatment. Hence both positive and negative changes in functioning can lead to both re-joining and leaving the troupe. Dynamic trajectories like this example, in addition to the other factors presented in Figure 5.1, highlight that the structure of *The Stars of Light* as a setting for people with psychiatric disabilities is stable enough to manage various types of sporadic involvement.

A third critical point presented in Figure 5.1 relates directly to the issue of sporadic involvement. The borders of the arrow representing troupe involvement are dotted lines. This signifies a kind of semi-permeable membrane to *The Stars of Light*. Troupe members are free to come and go, but not without some consideration of responsibility and group cohesion. Findings suggest that troupe members do not take the decision to leave the troupe lightly, given their valued role in the troupe, and the knowledge that someone else may have to cover a role or responsibility for them. Finally, the longevity and consistency of the troupe’s activities over the last 15 years speak to the idea that the stability in the form of the setting is maintained despite having permeable boundaries and shifting membership.

The construct emergent from the present study regarding setting characteristics of *The Stars of Light* relates to previous theory regarding citizen participation settings, as well as literature discussing recovery from serious mental illness specifically. Citizen participation historically serves as a central area of interest in community psychology literature. Research in this field has found that organizational characteristics play a significant role in the processes of
citizen participation (Wandersman & Florin, 1999). In their chapter outlining the impact of organizational characteristics on involvement Wandersman & Florin emphasize the evidence that organizational structure, formal procedures, and social climate all play a significant role in organizational success and citizen participation. In addition, they review evidence from research on neighborhood and block organizations that highlights the benefits of offering a range of participation opportunities. *The Stars of Light* as a setting may be harnessing the combination of established formal procedures and structures, with a variety of opportunities for participation. For example, the troupe may have a set plan to rehearse and present a seasonal tour show, while still accommodating a troupe member who may be unable to attend performances, but wants to include her/his written skit or poem.

The nature of the structure of initiatives and settings involving people with psychiatric disabilities has been studied previously, highlighting factors that contribute to retention and success. The majority of this research is focused on therapeutic and vocational settings (Bond et al., 1997; Bond, 2007; Drake et al., 1996; Leff et al., 2005). However there is a paucity of research on setting factors in non-traditional settings for persons with psychiatric disabilities. One example of an alternative setting for this population that has previously been studied with qualitative methods is the Alternatives By Consumers (ABC) organization (McCoy & Aronoff, 1994). Findings from the study of this grass-roots self-help group highlight key setting characteristics that played a role in building the organization and supporting consumer involvement. These characteristics include: building an alternative vision, establishing shared organizational dogma and rituals (including self-disclosure rituals), and routinization. *The Stars of Light* seem to mirror these characteristics, having long ago established routine patterns of practice and production, as well as establishing a purpose and vision of what the troupe is
designed to do. In addition to organizational factors, theory on community dynamics can also help situate the characteristics of the troupe in terms of how flexibility and stability are balanced.

In the landmark book *Studies in Empowerment*, Katz (1984) presented a chapter that introduces the idea of the “synergistic community.” He defines such a community as one 1) where renewable, expandable, and accessible resources are valued, 2) what is good for one is good for all, 3) mechanisms exist that ensure resources are shared among community members, and 4) the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. He positioned this type of community against the classic “scarcity paradigm” of human and community resources. Although Katz discussed such a community in a *macro* lens, findings from the present study suggest that *The Stars of Light* could be considered a *micro* formulation of a synergistic community. Whatever resources are available during any particular tour season (i.e. number of troupe members, member skills and artistic voices, financial resources, available performance settings) the troupe seems able to adjust in order to produce a performance, and simultaneously accommodate members’ level of involvement. The success of the troupe is transformed into a success for the individual members, while maintaining the troupe as an alternative community setting.

In addition to setting factors of the troupe influencing member involvement, individual troupe members are also constantly influencing the troupe’s trajectory as well. *The Stars of Light* was first created through a combination of organizational capacity and interest, along with the artistic expertise of the artistic director and other early contributors. As the troupe has developed though, the troupe is pushed forward and formulated through the experiences, interests, expertise and efforts of the troupe members living with psychiatric disabilities. In this way, the troupe has become member-driven in many ways. Findings also suggest that the members’ personal stories
Emergent constructs from the present research also suggest that future directions for troupe activities are also shaped in part by member interest and suggestion. However, the extent to which troupe members are empowered within the troupe setting to significantly steer the troupe activities is unclear. Findings do however suggest that the individual or collective capacity of troupe members to make future changes to the troupe may be tied to growing the roles and responsibilities of troupe members. Consistent involvement in the troupe also seems to increase the accumulated knowledge of critical local setting factors, such as the politics of the Janet Wattles Center, organizational networks in the Rockford area, and details of behavioral and activity norms within the troupe.

**Involvement, Identity Development, Recovery, and Empowerment**

One of the most thoroughly articulated theoretical ideas expressed through the narrative data of this study is how involvement in *The Stars of Light* impacts the participants’ personal growth, identity development, and recovery from illness. The theoretical constructs that emerged in regards to this emphasize that 1) setting factors of the troupe help promote personal growth of various kinds, and 2) personal gains are carried forward to other aspects of life. In order to situate these findings I will first address how they relate to previous theory on identity development and people with psychiatric disabilities. Second I will discuss how findings relate to previous literature on recovery from mental illness. Finally, I will focus on the idea of troupe involvement as empowering.

Previous research has focused on how one’s sense of self is affected by severe and chronic mental illness, and how identity and sense of self can play a role in meaning making and
recovery (Davidson et al., 2005; Davidson & Strauss, 1992; Cook & Jonikas, 2002; Czuchta & Johnson, 1998; Hahn, 1997). Davidson & Strauss (1992) posit that having a consistent, dynamic, and functional sense of self is central to the process of improvement. Findings from the present study highlight how troupe involvement offers people with psychiatric disabilities improved self-confidence, skills development and an increased sense of a functional and affective self-concept. Themes from participant narratives presented above help elucidate how a sense of membership, purpose, social cohesion, and group efficacy work together to influence personal growth and identity development.

The present findings also highlight how the collective sense of troupe purpose (fighting stigma, educating public audiences, helping other consumers, etc.) helps develop identity within the individual troupe member. In their study addressing identity politics and “revitalization” of mental health consumers involved in Alternatives By Consumers, McCoy & Aronoff (1994) state, “the ethos and work of the organization are the media through which members experience identity transformation” (pg. 378). Evidence from the present study suggests that this is also true in the case of The Stars of Light. Another aspect of troupe involvement that seems to enhance identity development is the supportive relationships and culture of hope and positivity that exists within the troupe. In their multifaceted model of the recovery from psychiatric disabilities, Mancini, Hardiman and Lawson (2005) emphasize the critical influence of meaningful activities and supportive relationships in the transformation of an “illness-dominated” identity (uselessness, worthlessness, and hopelessness) to a sense of well-being (purpose, meaning, hopefulness, and confidence). The troupe environment appears to foster increased sense of meaning and purpose, combined with the meaningful activity of presenting original, creative, and informative performances. Theory related to symbolic interactionism also helps situate the
personal development of troupe members, in that supportive environments are thought to help
one construct new strengths, capacities, and possibilities (Blumer, 1969).

In addition to the characteristics of the setting and troupe activities, identity development
may also occur through a process of re-labeling the self. Those who suffer from psychiatric
disabilities live with the added complexity of navigating labels foisted upon them by society and
a complex mental health system. Besides the juvenile epithets and terms of stigmatization such
as “crazy,” “nuts,” or “loony,” the person is confronted with many other labels with which to
identify. Whatever the current social and political milieu, the psychological and medical
establishments offer a variety of labels; some forced (e.g., “bipolar,” “schizoaffective,”
“borderline,” “serious mental illness”) and others to choose from to anchor ones social identity
(e.g., “consumer,” “consumer/survivor,” “patient,” “client,” “advocate,” “peer-supporter,”)2.
Bolzan and colleagues interviewed members of a “consumer” support group in Australia and
found that this label is being challenged along with the “consumerist agenda,” with new self-
identification as “social citizen.” They found that values of autonomy, equality, and democratic
participation are championed in such groups, with participants seeing themselves as “experts”
with the capacity to help other with mental illness (Bolzan et. al., 2001). Thematic analysis from
the present study suggests that the participants’ involvement in The Stars of Light has offered
them new labels to identity with and anchor their sense of self, including “expert,” “advocate,”
“activist,” “actor,” and “artist.” For those participants with previous self-identification with such
labels, troupe participation seems to be enhancing that identification. Connecting with an artistic

2 Indeed, for the purposes of this study I have chosen to label the participants as “psychiatrically
disabled” not because of some fundamental truth about their identity, but because it is simply a
useful and widely understood descriptor of one aspect of there social functioning
identity may help people with psychiatric disabilities rebuild a sense of self that has been fractured or overwhelmed by mental illness.

In addition to processes of identity development, the emergent constructs from this study highlight ways in which troupe involvement is impacting the process of recovery from psychiatric disabilities. “Recovery” from psychiatric disabilities/mental illness has been addressed a great deal in previous research regarding personal growth, systemic factors, and service delivery (Anthony et al., 2003; Chamberlin, 1997; Fisher & Ahern, 2003; Fisher & Chamberlin, 2004; Ralph, 2000; Ralph, Lambert & Kidder, 2002). The present findings are very much in line with recent studies that have used qualitative methods and first-person narratives to explore components of recovery, define the construct, and position future research (Bradshaw, Armour & Roseborough, 2007; Davidson, et al., 2005; Deegan, 1996; Ochocka, Nelson & Janzen, 2005; Mancini, Hardiman & Lawson, 2005; Ridgway, 2001). Besides outlining the various psycho-social-spiritual components of recovery, many of these authors address the impacts of recovery narratives on established ideas about the course of mental illness, the notion that treatment and recovery are passive processes, and the importance of meaningful roles in society for those living with chronic mental illness. Ridgway (2001) states that recovery narratives challenge dominant discourse of “decline narratives” with new “quest narratives that open pathways and present positive trajectories for the life course of discovery and personal growth” (pg. 340).

One previous study that helps situate the emergent themes from the present study outlines a new framework for understanding recovery. The framework is based on findings from a longitudinal participatory action research project studying Consumer/Survivor Initiatives
(CSIs) in Ontario, Canada. Ochocka and colleagues (including consumers themselves) conducted semi-structured interviews with participants in CSIs over an 18-month period. Qualitative analysis was performed to build an inclusive framework that explains the recovery process of participants (Ochocka, Nelson & Janzen, 2005). They present a multi-component process that incorporates the “drive to move forward,” and how people move forward using various means to negotiate self and external circumstances. Their model is recreated in Figure 5.2 above. Their study found that people living with psychiatric disabilities experience a spiraling process of positive and negative changes as they move through processes of recovery.

The experiences of the members of The Stars of Light seem to relate directly to this model, especially in regards to negotiating internal and external factors, as well as the two primary types of negotiation strategies described in the research. In “negotiating self,” the
participants in the present study described their experiences forming an artistic identity, facing fears related to self-disclosure and performance, managing shifting symptoms, articulating their inner personal drives and motivation, and negotiating shifts in these drives. In “negotiating environment” the participants described their ongoing efforts to manage their multiple life roles outside the troupe and in other Janet Wattles settings, adjust to troupe dynamics, find their voice within the troupe, and adjust to shifting audience factors. Ochocka and colleagues (2005) also articulate two primary means of negotiating the self and environment: accommodation-oriented negotiation strategies, and action-oriented strategies. The participants in the present study expressed means of negotiation that fit these strategies. Examples of accommodation-oriented tasks are: being realistic about level of troupe involvement, knowing the contours and details of one’s mental illness, and balancing priorities of family, employment, and troupe activity. In addition, Ochocka and colleagues highlight two examples of action-oriented strategies that fit directly into the findings from the present study: seeking social support, and engaging in systems change.

One of the ways that participants explained their progress in recovery is by utilizing the various services offered by the Janet Wattles Center, in concert with troupe participation. An intriguing finding related to this involves common patterns of involvement in the Expressive Arts Therapy Group offered by Janet Wattles, and involvement in The Stars of Light. Those participants who have been involved in the Expressive Arts group tended to describe a pattern of progressing from that group into The Stars of Light, but with some overlap. Participants tended to describe the Expressive Arts group as a means of engaging and working with more severely disabled consumers. However they tended to gradually shift their involvement, creating a period
when they were involved in both activities. Involvement in these two activities can be seen in light of the model of recovery addressed above (see Figure 5.3 above). This process of shifting involvement may be tied to the themes from the present findings “decreasing social fear and isolation” and “developing social skills.” These seem to be part of both Expressive Arts Therapy and Stars of Light involvement. This is also graphically represented in Figure 5.3. This process is also consistent with previous research on therapeutic work with people with psychiatric disabilities and treatment of social disengagement (Schnee, 1996). As fear decreases and skills are developed, participants may feel ready for the community engagement and responsibilities involved in the troupe, but transition slowly between settings to “negotiate” the self and
environment addressed above. Here previous theory on person-environment fit (Livert & Hughes, 2002) could inform further research into the transitional processes between settings and people living with psychiatric disabilities. Previous theory also challenges older ideas of linear progression in the recovery process (Ochocka et al., 2005; Ridgway, 2001), suggesting that the spiral process of change involves a more dynamic ebb and flow to progress in life goals. The present study suggests that just as recovery in general involves gradual processes, so too may a person’s fit in a particular setting (arts-oriented or otherwise). More research is needed to address how and when dovetailing new settings into established settings is appropriate for this population.

Finally, findings from the present study suggest that involvement in *The Stars of Light* involves personal development in line with previous understandings of empowerment processes. Chamberlin (1997) formulated a working definition of “empowerment” as it relates to people with psychiatric disabilities based on data from user-run self-help programs for people with psychiatric disabilities. She outlines fifteen qualities of empowerment, nine of which are addressed in the present research with *The Stars of Light*: Assertiveness, feeling the person can make a difference (being hopeful), learning to think critically, not feeling alone/a part of a group, effecting change in one’s life and one’s community, learning skills, changing other’s perceptions of one’s competency and capacity to act, coming out of the closet, and increasing one’s positive self-image and overcoming stigma. Addressing the interplay of empowerment and narrative, Rappaport comments that personal and collective empowerment “may be about understanding and creating settings where people participate in the discovery, creation, and enhancement of their own community narratives and personal stories” (Rappaport, 1995, pg. 805). This idea
seems directly related to the creative process of the troupe, as well as the opportunity to explore and present personal stories.

Previous research on the conditions for empowering people with psychiatric disabilities also outlines both internal and external conditions. Internal conditions are defined as controlled symptoms and decision-making skills. External conditions are defined as access to resources (including basic needs such as transportation, but also elements such as emotionally supportive groups), reciprocal concrete incentives, decision-making structures and processes, availability of choices and information, and a supportive organizational culture (Linhorst & Eckert, 2003).

Findings from the present study suggest that The Stars of Light functions as a setting that provides several of these external conditions, as well as the opportunity to develop internal resources as well. The individual developmental processes expressed in the data also relate to Kiefer’s developmental perspective of citizen empowerment. He concludes that, “empowerment is not a commodity to be acquired, but a transforming process constructed through action” (Kiefer, 1984, pg. 27). Findings indicate that as troupe members devote time and energy to the troupe’s activities over many years, they develop what Kiefer terms “participatory competence.” These are a set of insights, abilities, and accumulated knowledge that are acquired over time through the process of overcoming challenges, working collectively with others, and learning to navigate social and political variables. The troupe members learn to act as change agents in the community, manage the dynamics of the troupe, and put personal growth processes to bear on various areas of their life, not just within the troupe. However, the spiraling trajectories of recovery from psychiatric disability also inform an expansion of Kiefer’s model. The ebb and flow of recovery may exacerbate the challenges involved in the “era of commitment” that Kiefer
describes as “integrating new personal knowledge and skill into the reality and structure of their everyday life-worlds” (pg. 24).

*Community Connections and Community Impact*

A third meta-construct that emerged from the findings (composed of “Support and Dependency with Janet Wattles Center,” and “Multifaceted Relationships with Community Organizations”) addresses the ways in which *The Stars of Light* interacts with the Janet Wattles Center and other community organizations, as well as how the troupe sees itself impacting society through those interactions. The following discussion addresses the troupe as an alternative model of a grass-roots organization involving people with psychiatric disabilities, and how this model supports development of organizational networks and community integration. Following this I address how findings relate to previous research on community impact of these grass-roots organizations. In addition, I address what findings suggest for the future of the troupe and further development of the organizational model.

*The Stars of Light* seems to present a hybrid model of an organization that is focused on offering a setting for people with psychiatric disabilities to thrive, as well as influence community attitudes about mental illness. It is “hybrid” in its autonomy to create presentations about mental illness and connect to any number of community organizations, yet it is supported by a mental health service organization both ideologically and logistically. Unlike other examples of “consumer-run organizations” or “consumer/survivor initiatives” (Nelson et. al., 2006) this theater group is run by a mental health service professional and a professional actor. Although troupe members are involved in creating performance content, sharing personal narratives, and steering troupe activities; the primary leadership, logistical support, and outreach to other community organizations is done by the two troupe directors. The troupe is at once a
means of telling the wider community about the existence of Janet Wattles Center, and a community dialogue about stigma, living with psychiatric disability, and the real potential for recovery.

A unique factor in the development of the troupe is it’s branching out to connect with, educate, and perform for a wide variety of community organizations. Over time this has created a network of connections that includes, but is not controlled by, the Janet Wattles Center. Although previous research has addressed the ways that grass-roots organizations involving mental health consumers involve advocacy, peer-support, civil engagement, and autonomy (Bolzan et. al, 2001; Felton, 2005; McCoy & Aronoff, 1994; Nelson et. al., 2006), the present study highlights how a troupe such as The Stars of Light can activate these processes while developing an outreach methodology that not only informs and entertains, but works to disseminate the model as well. In addition, the troupe’s close connection to the Janet Wattles Center and more traditional hierarchical structure of leadership do not seem to diminish connections with other organizations or the creative freedoms within the troupe. Previous research supports the idea that hierarchy and formalization within organizations involving people with psychiatric disabilities is not necessarily detrimental. Indeed, pride, a “family” atmosphere, and a mutual helping culture can exist under these conditions (Felton, 2005).

The community connections and networking that the troupe has taken part in over the last 15 years has developed a sense of community integration that does not appear to exist in other models of consumer-run organizations or psychosocial rehabilitation settings. The troupe’s model suggests that settings involving people with psychiatric disabilities need not be “ghettoized,” or focused solely on peer-support and access to resources. Previous theory on social transformation suggest that the troupe has developed a model that at once addresses the
goals of “capacity building,” “group empowerment,” and “relational community-building” (Maton, 2000). In addition, troupe participation could be considered a means for persons with psychiatric disabilities to act in the community not only as advocate for the mentally ill, but as more integrated “social citizens” (Bolzan et. al, 2001) and even “community leaders” (Tandon et. al., 1998).

The future will undoubtedly hold many opportunities and challenges for the troupe. Findings indicate that inter-organizational networks involving the troupe have grown sporadically, and future growth will most likely continue in a similar pattern. As members come and go and new connections are build and taper off, *The Stars of Light* will most likely shift its priorities and efforts accordingly. However the present findings suggest that the troupe will be forced to address critical organizational decisions in the future. One challenge inherent in any volunteer-based group regards financial security. Funding sources are needed that will help the troupe pay for travel costs and other materials. The troupe’s managing director mentioned during the member checking meeting that due to budget cuts, the Janet Wattles Center can no longer include funding for the troupe in it’s yearly budget. This is causing the directors to spend considerable time in recent months writing grants for future funding. The troupe may choose to shift to a more consultation-oriented “for hire” kind of model, expanding on it’s established networks involving training presentations. Interestingly, the director also commented that they have had much more interest from funding sources in the arts and theater worlds, compared with organizations in the mental health fields. This highlights another advantage of *The Stars of Light* as a setting, in that it can build community networks that involve theater and arts initiatives and programs beyond the established settings traditionally involved in mental health treatment, psychosocial rehabilitation, and mental health advocacy (e.g. NAMI).
Social Activism

Qualitative analysis generated five primary theoretical constructs related to the social activism and change efforts of *The Stars of Light*. Given the overlap between the five constructs, the following section will discuss the constructs in terms of two broader theoretical ideas: 1) Labeling the self versus labeling group action, and 2) The “how” of troupe social activism. The purpose of the following discussion is to explore the interactions of the individual, troupe, and community levels of analysis, and connect and compare findings from the present study to previous research and theory.

*Labeling the Self vs. Labeling Group Action*

A primary goal of the present study was to explore participants’ classification and understanding of what *The Stars of Light* actions are doing to impact the wider community. The emergent constructs point to a distinction between how participants classify themselves (as social activists or otherwise), and how they classify the actions and activities of the troupe as a whole. Participant reactions to the label “social activist” was mixed, however the view of the troupe as focused on changing perceptions and ideas about mental illness was strongly agreed upon. Troupe goals to educate, reduce stigma, and impact the mental health system seem to be internalized by the participants, more so than any specific label describing their personal identity. This phenomenon may relate to several issues.

First, constructs related to social activism and developmental processes discussed above suggest that individual identity development involves a process of exploration and negotiation in the lives of participants. Previous research on marginalized and disenfranchised groups suggests that being disempowered at a systemic level limits an individual’s personal growth and means of
affecting change in their lives or in their community (Perkins, 1995; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Present findings suggest that even when offered an active and meaningful role in community change, persons with psychiatric disabilities may struggle with seeing themselves as a change agent due to previous disenfranchisement. The issue of representation also may be involved here. The extent to which troupe members see themselves as representing and advocating all people with psychiatric disabilities may impact self-identification as a social activist. Research suggests that a recent push-back in mental health settings to consumer representation tends to silence activism, questions legitimacy of consumer roles, and leads to discriminatory expectations of consumers (Happell & Roper, 2006). Therefore efforts are being made in some areas to shift ideas and labels of “participation” to newer ideas of “consumer leadership” that may release consumers from unfair expectations of representation and strengthen their identity as change agent (Gordon, 2005; Happell & Roper, 2006). Interactions with participants in the present study support the idea that labels matter, and offering persons with psychiatric disabilities new titles, roles and labels may be just as important as offering novel settings for community engagement and change. Findings also suggest that as the sense of self develops and is defined and strengthened, participants’ motivation to influence social change may develop as well. Involvement in the troupe may be a means of developing and putting into use an “active sense of self” (Czuchta & Johnson, 1998; Davidson & Strauss, 1992). However, the extent to which the sense of self has developed may be a mediator in the internalization of the label of “activist” versus other labels such as “advocate” or “educator.”

Second, findings suggest that group-level values, norms, and goals may play a role in directing personal identity development of troupe members. Previous research on peer-support groups of people with psychiatric disabilities indicates that common goals and purpose help
individuals feel a sense of belonging, agency, and purpose in life (Nelson et al., 1998; Nelson et al., 2006; Smith, 2000). Developments in the recent history of the recovery and consumer/survivor movements have also established norms related to social inclusion, advocacy, activism, and stigma-reduction efforts. These new societal movements help establish and justify the goals and efforts of *The Stars of Light*. Social change efforts carried out by organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), consumer-run groups, and consumer activist groups such as MindFreedom, set up established models of collective social action and group cohesion among people with psychiatric disabilities. Therefore, participants involved in *The Stars of Light* may find it easier to acknowledge and internalize a group-level identity, sense of agency, and purpose than one that is more individualized.

Third, participants’ different recovery trajectories may lead to differing challenges related to self-identification, as well as help explain the shifting motivations for troupe involvement highlighted in the present findings. One’s sense of personal agency and power may shift due to the spiraling nature of recovery, making it more difficult to build a solid “activist” identity. It may be easier to align with a group-level identity as an anchor for one’s sense of self. Solid and consistent troupe goals and agency in the community may allow participants a sense of community and collective purpose, despite shifting functioning, motivations, symptoms, and personal struggles. Having addressed the differences in the way participants categorize the self versus the troupe’s actions, a discussion is warranted of the specific means by which *The Stars of Light* works to impact the wider community.

*The “How” of Troupe Social Activism*

Several emergent constructs address the overall methods of social activism and means of impacting the wider community. These constructs present the troupe’s methods as different than
other forms of activism, incorporating humor as a powerful tool, and suggest multiple means of impacting the community beyond direct contact through live performance.

The troupe’s community interventions present at once a utilization of established means of contact, and innovation in the methods of second-order change for persons with psychiatric disabilities. The troupe’s most frequent means of community contact is through live performance within the physical setting of a host organization. Previous research suggests that presentations by mental health consumers within familiar settings can be effective in improving attitudes and knowledge of audiences in educational settings (Faigin & Stein, 2008; Pinfold et al., 2003; Schulze et al., 2003) and mental health service providers (Cook, Jonikas & Razzano, 1995). The Stars of Light structure their venues of contact in this way, traveling to schools, community organizations, justice system settings, etc. The flexibility of the traveling and small-scale theater production may also enhance the ways the troupe’s activities are a “user friendly” means of community intervention.

Besides the nature of the contact involved, the tone or feeling of the troupe’s activities warrant discussion as well. The theme emerged that troupe activities are a “gentler” or “softer” form of activism compared to common forms of protest and activism. Although participants sighted the use of humor and light-hearted entertainment as a central means of keeping the activism “gentle;” previous research on consumer-run organizations suggests that being non-aggressive in efforts to influence public opinion and policy may relate more generally to the nature of collective action by marginalized groups. In their examination of Alternatives By Consumers (ABC), McCoy and Aronoff (1994) learned of the “gentle justice” that emerged as a means of social activism within the organization. The group avoided street protest for fear that picketing and protests would be seen as signs of illness and work counter to their goal of social
inclusion and acceptance. In addition, the state support needed to sustain and grow the organization also led to a softening of ABC members’ political activism. Persons with psychiatric disabilities are positioned in Western societies as reliant on social services, accommodation, and supportive settings. Therefore, social activism on issues related to stigma, social inclusion, and human rights are in danger of being portrayed as “biting the hand that feeds” should efforts be seen as too confrontational or aggressive. The experience of Alternatives By Consumers, and the findings that *The Stars of Light* tries to be gentle, both suggest that societal norms may be to work *with*, rather than *against*, the established systems of mental health care and state funded social services.

The use of humor to educate people and stimulate social change is not a new idea. The use of satire and hyperbole has been a part of Western entertainment and political discourse for hundreds of years. However, *The Stars of Light* productions are an example of how humor can be incorporated and woven together with more serious content and narrative in order to impact audience attitudes about mental illness specifically. Previous consumer groups have used humor in artistic street protest and demonstration about the rights of people with psychiatric disabilities (Pembrooke, 2007), but *The Stars of Light* use humor in more traditional stage performance to entertain and inform audiences. Findings suggest that the combination of setting, format, and tone of the troupe’s performances all play a part in engaging audiences and influencing attitudes. Humor seems to offer the dual role of relaxing both audience member and troupe member simultaneously. In addition, humor may function to build social connection and cohesion between the troupe members and the wider community through a common appreciation of humor and satire. Humor then plays a role in normalization and social inclusion for troupe members,
calling to mind the adage, “Laugh, and the world laughs with you.” Comedy and satire thus offer a means of being “with” the world, rather than excluded from it.

Another idea within the emergent constructs related to community impact is that important connections exist between individual sense of efficacy and the troupe’s collective efficacy as a social change agent. Bandora (1982) explains the links between self-efficacy and group efficacy this way,

Achievement of collective efficacy requires cogent means of relating factional interests to shared purposes. The unifying purposes must be explicit and attainable through concerted effort. Because success calls for sustained endeavor over a long time, proximal subgoals are needed to provide incentives and evidence of progress along the way. (pg 145)

“Factional interests” in the case of the troupe could be considered the various individual motivations for involvement reported by troupe members. Findings suggest that the needed “subgoals” related to the “shared purpose” of community change are attained at each performance (feedback from audiences, etc); as well as through gradual growth of community and organizational networks. The emergent theme that individual members act as change agents through their own personal growth and social networks outside the troupe also relates to previous research describing second-order change efforts involved in recovery processes (Onken et al, 2007) as well as research on the role of personal empowerment in successful community organizations (Wandersman & Florin, 1999). Bandora’s “collective efficacy” becomes a “collective empowerment” in the community organization context,

Collective empowerment extends beyond the sense of accomplishment and mastery inherent in self-help/mutual aid activities and speaks to these organizations obtaining increased
mastery over their affairs by altering the distribution of power and decision-making authority with the community. (Wandersmam & Florin, 1999, pg. 266)

In the case of *The Stars of Light*, there seems to be a synergy between empowerment of individual members and a collective empowerment of the whole troupe. This synergy may enhance the social change efforts of both. The means by which the troupe impacts audiences and the larger community involve both documented and newer forms of community engagement. Although previous research has focused on 1) individual-level processes of growth and empowerment of people with psychiatric disabilities (Cook & Jonikas, 2002; Mancini, Hardiman & Lawson, 2005; Smith, 2000), and 2) aspects of engaging system change involved in recovery (Ochocka et. al., 2005), more research is needed that clarifies the linkages between personal growth trajectories and the ways this growth feeds back into methods of system change and community engagement. The findings of the present study speak to these linkages, but more investigation is warranted.

**Characteristics of Theater**

Findings of the present study explore theater as a means of self-expression, the particular methods of troupe rehearsal and performance, and participants’ reflections on what it is that makes theatrical activities worthwhile and different from other art forms. Seven primary theoretical constructs emerged from the findings related to the characteristics of theatrical activities involving people living with psychiatric disabilities. The following section will discuss these constructs in terms of three broader theoretical ideas: 1) Theater, identity development, and personal narrative, 2) Theater as connection with community, and 3) The dynamic processes of theatrical activities.
Theater, Identity Development, and Personal Narrative

Theoretical constructs emerged from the data that address the troupe members’ internal experiences while taking part in theatrical activities. Participants shared a variety of experiences that involve negotiation of the self (see above pg. 144). Acting and personal expression on stage seem to stimulate both excitement and nervousness; connection with a sense of self and a sense of distance from oneself. Theatrical activities in the troupe appear to offer participants an opportunity to explore, define, and enhance their sense of self.

Previous research looking at how artistic occupation enables people living with chronic illness suggests that a process of “identity reconfiguration” takes place. In a grounded theory study of women living with chronic illness Reynolds found that this reconfiguration process involves 1) reconnection with the previous, pre-illness self, 2) positive personal identity growth through expression of personal voice, 3) restoration of a sense of one’s own expertise, status, and self-esteem, and 4) provision of a socially validated identity through receiving praise, gaining status, and sharing knowledge with others (Reynolds, 2003). Although this study involved textile and visual art rather than performance or theater arts, several of these processes of identity development fit nicely with the findings from the present study. In the case of The Stars of Light, participants share their personal voice both through creative portrayal of other characters and through the presentation of their real personal stories.

McAdams (2001) life story model of personal identity posits that people provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self. Participants in The Stars of Light seem to be re-storying their lives not only by developing an artistic and expressive identity, but also by literally sharing autobiography in a public context.
Findings suggest that the process of choosing what to share of one’s personal story, managing challenges of performance, and witnessing illness-focused identities via fictionalized characters may all play a part in developing and reconstructing a sense of self. Given the fracturing of the self brought on by psychiatric disability, troupe involvement may play a role in providing the “unity” discussed by McAdams. Troupe members’ identity development may also be enhanced by the growth of “imaginative capacity” (Greene, 1995; Thomas, 2007). This capacity is defined as the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise, and opens one’s perception to the unexpected. Theatrical activities of the troupe seem to allow participants a full spectrum of connecting to what is, or what has been, in their lives; but also connecting to what might be. This occurs not only in the context of “becoming someone else” on stage, but also through connecting with a new self-efficacy and purpose.

Sharing personal narrative in the context of The Stars of Light also mirrors other current initiatives that offer people with psychiatric disabilities the opportunity to share personal experiences with the public (Stein et al. 2009; Wood & Wahl, 2006). However, The Stars of Light offers the additional presentation of these speakers in the valued role of “artist” or “actor” in addition to that of “expert” on issues of mental illness. Whether a perception of this hybrid role matters in regards to identity development or stigma reduction is unclear and requires further investigation.

The influence of self-disclosure of personal narrative on the lives of people with psychiatric disability has been addressed in previous research. Hahn (1997) states that the process of sharing aspects of oneself openly offers a person the opportunity to develop self-acceptance in place of previous self-marginalization regarding one’s disability. Disability is then projected and internalized as an experience instead of a loss. Baldwin (2005) emphasizes the
power of supporting “narrativity” of people with psychiatric disabilities. He suggests four means of doing this: 1) maintaining narrative continuity, 2) maintaining narrative agency, 3) countering master narratives, and 4) attention to small stories. The troupe’s activities can be considered a means of supporting narrativity of participants along these lines. First, narrative continuity is maintained through the establishment of troupe-level norms and values. These norms and values may provide individuals “statements of core values and beliefs on which the individual wishes decision to be made” (Baldwin, 2005, pg 1025). Second, the fact that troupe members get to decide when to participate and what to share from their personal stories is in line with the idea of maintaining narrative agency. Third, the troupe’s goals to reduce stigma and educate audiences on the realities of living with a psychiatric disability presents an example of “countering master narratives” that create unrealistic and discriminatory views in society. Finally, the presentation of “small stories” is valued in the context of the troupe’s theatrical presentations. Participants are given a privileged public forum to share life experience, however small or detailed.

*Theater as Connection with Community*

Emergent constructs related to the troupe’s talkbacks with audiences and the influence of audience factors on the actors experience highlight the extent to which theatrical activities can serve as a means of connecting people with psychiatric disabilities to their communities. This connection involves an emotional give and take between actors and audience, as well as an opportunity for actors/consumers to receive praise and feedback from audiences. The emotional connection between actor and audience may serve two powerful functions: impact on audiences’ attitudes, and impact on the empowerment of the troupe members.

Previous research on the relative impact of a live versus video-taped theatrical production involving people with psychiatric disabilities indicates that a live performance involving actual
personal contact with the actors elicited a significantly stronger affective reaction from audience members, as measured by post-performance questionnaire (Faigin & Stein, 2008). This finding is supported by present findings that participants feel theatrical art forms are especially powerful because of the interactive and emotional connections between performers and audiences. One important factor to note however is that *Stars of Light* audiences are self-selecting to a degree. Prior expectation and emotional openness may enhance the emotional impact of the troupe performances. However, participant experiences over the long performance history of the troupe indicate that the emotional impacts on audience members do vary to a large extent. More research is needed that measures subjective emotional responses of actor and audience, along with other pre-test measures, to determine factors that may mediate the emotional impact of live theater.

Findings from the present study also suggest that the inherent nature of theater as a social enterprise may relate directly to individual-level gains from participation. Here the social nature of theater as an art form, and the social process involved in recovery (Mancini, Hardiman, & Lawson, 2005) seem to align. Theatrical activities may be empowering to the degree that they offer an opportunity for social contact and interaction, between the actors on stage, and between the actors and audience members. Sprague & Hayes (2000) address the importance of interpersonal and social relationships in their work on self-determination and empowerment. They comment,

Different kinds of social situations, embodying different potential relationships with others, allow us the opportunity to enact, see ourselves enacting, and see others’ responses to different aspects of the person we can be. (Sprague & Hayes, 2000, pg. 677)
This idea speaks directly to the ways in which theatrical activities help the troupe members interact creatively with one another, and with audiences during talkbacks. The importance of connecting with others is further highlighted in the finding that troupe members repeatedly emphasized the powerful moments of interacting with audience members during talkbacks, and one-on-one after performances.

The social interaction and engagement involved in theatrical activities are not without risk however. This is addressed in the emergent theme from the present findings that audience factors greatly influence the experience of the troupe members, and that navigating the emotional aspects of performance and personal story telling can be taxing. Previous research on a women’s community theater troupe emphasize that direct involvement in live theater involves a willingness to be exposed emotionally on stage, and the provocative nature of the artistic content may stimulate conflict between participants, or between participants and audiences (Boehm & Boehm, 2003). Therefore theatrical activities involving people with psychiatric disabilities may necessarily involve a careful negotiation of the setting’s stimulation of community connection and interpersonal engagement (Schnee, 1996), as well as the emotional risk taking and unstructured dynamics inherent in live performance.

**Dynamic Processes of Theatrical Activities**

Emergent constructs such as “theatrical forms are flexible and inclusive,” “challenges to rehearsal/production involve personal and setting factors,” and “unique characteristics of theater as an art form” all speak to the dynamic processes involved in the activities of the troupe, as well as theater in general. Theater arts can become a language through which the individual, setting, and community communicate and relate. In the case of *The Stars of Light* the dynamics of this
communication not only involve rewards and challenges at the troupe-level, but also issues related to dynamics inherent in community arts projects and managing multiple troupe goals.

A central complexity in the work of *The Stars of Light* is managing the multiple goals of the troupe. This troupe is an example of a community arts initiative that at once attempts to entertain and educate audiences, as well as offer a means of community integration and personal development of participants. Findings indicate that the troupe has not made much effort to specifically define the type of theater that they are creating. However previous research on alternative theater activities may help situate the troupe’s efforts. One line of research has looked at the various means of relaying information and data in innovative and theatrical ways. Rossiter and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of previous research in the area and identified four performance genres: 1) non-theatrical performances simply presenting information, 2) ethno-dramas, which can be interactive or non-interactive, 3) theatrical research-based performances, and 4) fictional theatrical performances (Rossiter et al., 2008). The theatrical performances of *The Stars of Light* seem to be a hybrid of interactive ethno-drama and fictional performance. The data from public health and mental health research regarding prevalence of mental illness, symptom description, and recovery processes all situate the work as ethno-drama. Mienczakowski describes this methodology in this way,

> Ethno-drama seeks explanation and expression in a public form which opens its meanings to its informants as well as to wide audiences including the academy. In so doing it 'de-academises' its research reporting format by translating its data into scripted performances. (Mienczakowski, 1997, p.170)

However the majority of the troupe’s performances involve fictional scripted skits that do not present as research reporting per se. The process of choosing artistic, factual, or autobiographical
content is an ongoing dynamic within the troupe; one that highlights the flexibility and inclusivity found in the emergent constructs of the present study.

Another dynamic process involves the troupe/community interactions involved in positioning The Stars of Light as a community arts initiative. In their work discussing art as community narrative Thomas and Rappaport (1996) emphasize that arts projects such as this cause communities to open up what they think of as “art.” In this process an arts initiative must manage the goals of sharing community narratives with societal expectations about aesthetics. In addition, they observe that “telling our stories” can involve the telling of different, and sometimes conflicting, stories (Thomas & Rapport, 1996). The Stars of Light, and other troupes like it, must face both these challenges and incorporate their solutions into the artistic works and the structure of the setting. For example, how might a troupe decide to incorporate conflicting narratives regarding the benefits and problems with psychotropic medications? If the troupe has a clear “take home a message” regarding medications and recovery it wants to send, how might this complicate their decisions? At a broader societal level of analysis, community theater initiatives also involve a relationship to various systems factors. In his work on the political economy of creativity Seitz (2003) comments that any creative activity emerges from a set of “communities of influence.” Whether one is aware of it or not, he argues that these activities are born of a mix of intellectual abilities, social or cultural organization of knowledge domains (e.g. scientific, artistic, etc.), and distribution of power within a group, community, or society (Seitz, 2003). Theater may be inclusive and flexible as an art form, but by this view, ultimately any theatrical activity involving people with psychiatric disabilities will be shaped by these sources of influence. In order to continue to address their multiple goals The Stars of Light and other similar troupes may do well to explore these “communities of influence” more fully.
Within larger sociopolitical contexts, the organization and functioning of *The Stars of Light* as a theater troupe requires attention to various dynamics at a setting level. First, the nature of the relationship between actor and director, manager and volunteer, must be navigated. Boehm and Boehm emphasize the power of creating partnership between marginalized groups of amateur artists and the directors. In their study of a women’s theater group they found that participants originally perceived the group’s director as a “teacher” and “mentor,” but over time came to perceive her a “partner” (Boehm & Boehm, 2003). For some of the members of *The Stars of Light*, their relationship with the artistic and managing director have followed a similar pattern. It seems as participants get more experience sharing their creative voice and contributing to the troupe, they see how they play a crucial role along side the directors. However, the fact that the directors still lead the troupe and take care of most logistical tasks, the troupe does not present an example of fully shared roles. Yet the small size and “family” feel of the troupe seems to contribute nonetheless to a sense of partnership within the troupe.

Finally, theatrical activities are described in the present study as being inclusive and allowing a wide range of expressive possibilities. However, setting constraints are also evident in regards to placing boundaries on what is included in performance. In their study with members of the Lawnmowers Theater Company, comprised of actors with developmental disabilities, Price and Barron (1999) highlight the tasks involved in adjusting troupe boundaries to the participants’ changes in learning, motivation, autonomy, and confidence. Given the recovery and identity development processes addressed above, *The Stars of Light* and similar troupes may have to continually adjust the boundaries of artistic activities and member roles to continue to keep the setting viable and inclusive. Other previous research on the incorporation of theater into alternative settings also emphasizes the importance of including several components: 1) choosing
appropriate methodological approaches to fit the aims of the setting, 2) including enough time
and commitment for process and support, 3) appropriate physical environment, 4) informed
consent, and 5) a well trained facilitator (Monks, Barker & Mhanachain, 2001). These issues of
theatrical setting dynamics raise a larger issue as well: In maintaining alternative community-
based arts settings involving people with psychiatric disabilities, how democratic, hierarchical
and inclusive an environment is created? It seems that troupes such as *The Stars of Light* must
continue to answer this question, along side of managing the tasks of maintaining a functioning
theater company.

**Inquiry Process**

The partnering relationship with the troupe and the Janet Wattles Center organization for
the purposes of the present study was a dynamic process. The following presents reflections on
the processes of *entry, navigating relationships, working with archival data, and member
checking*. These reflections highlight critical stages of developing relationships with participants
and gatekeepers, challenges that arose during the project, and the specific setting factors that
both facilitated or inhibited the processes of inquiry. Including details of the process here may
inform future participatory action research with people living with psychiatric disabilities.

**Entry**

During the initial entry phase, while first meeting with the troupe and discussing the
project, I explicitly shared my perspective and prior experience in theater and working with
mental health consumers. The warm and casual nature of the initial contact with the troupe set
the tone for future interactions. Throughout the partnership with the troupe the directors were
critical gatekeepers for access to the troupe and facilitators for the partnership. From the
beginning of the partnership there was a sense of gratitude for interest being taken in the troupe,
and a willingness to help with data collection and scheduling. When first visiting Rockford, Illinois, I attended a regularly scheduled rehearsal taking place at The Silver Lining Club, the community-based psychosocial rehabilitation clubhouse run by the Janet Wattles Center. The experience of being welcomed by the troupe was blended with the sense of being welcomed by The Silver Lining Club as a whole. Throughout the project, I found that arriving early for scheduled meetings with the participants at the clubhouse and other Janet Wattles facilities allowed for a richer appreciation of the settings for troupe activities, and to interact with consumers and staff.

During initial contacts with the troupe my presence began to be manifest in a role of “participant-observer,” (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Being a part of the troupe’s packing and set-up process allowed for the building of rapport between me and the participants. My entry into partnership with the troupe positioned me at once in privileged positions of “research scientist” and “clinician,” as well as “helper” and “theater insider” having made my previous experience with theater/theater involving people with psychiatric disabilities explicit. The entry process involved positioning myself ideologically and physically side-by-side with the participants. Here the initial act of “asking” (Stein & Mankowski, 2004) involved an appreciation and articulation of how I see the research partnership as a means of “giving voice” to the participants (Mulvey et. al., 2000; Rappaport, 2000). Discussing my views on social inclusion for people with mental illness and my alignment with principles of the recovery movement also assisted in the process of entry and building rapport with participants.

Navigating Relationships

As the research partnership developed over time I made continual efforts to express my openness to discover the lived experiences of the troupe. Given the power imbalance of observer
vs. observed inherent in the research process, I repeatedly reminded them that I was not
functioning from a pre-conceived idea about their experiences. My hope was that participants
would appreciate that I saw them as experts in regards to living with psychiatric disabilities,
troupe activities, and knowledge of the history of the troupe and the Rockford community. I also
repeatedly explained to the troupe how I understood my place in the research partnership. My
hybrid role was one of *insider* in the contexts of familiarity with theater arts, psychiatric
disabilities, and the mental health field; but *outsider* in the context of the Rockford, Illinois, Janet
Wattles Center, and *Stars of Light* communities. In addition, although I traveled with the troupe
to several performances and witnessed rehearsals, I remained an outsider in that I never joined in
with the artistic activities of the troupe on stage or in rehearsal.

Generally speaking, navigating the relationships with the troupe members and directors
was a friendly and cooperative process, free of any significant roadblocks or frustrations. The
troupe members continuously showed an eagerness and openness to take part in the study
throughout the data collection process. One unexpected outcome of the partnership was the
extent of some participants’ eagerness to share their personal stories. For example, two of the
participants are a mother and son. Prior to the start of the present study they had written a book
together about their family’s experience living with mental illness and learning to support one
another through personal struggles. They asked me to read the book to better understand their
background and experiences. The process of “witnessing” (Stein & Mankowski, 2004) the troupe
involved a deeper level of emotional involvement in the lives of the participants (Carter &
Delamont, 1996), and a sense of being a “trusted other” accountable for what was shared.
Finally, since the troupe directors function in multiple roles within the troupe setting, and as
employees of the Janet Wattles Center, respect was shown to these multiple roles. I maintained
awareness that they were, to some degree, representing the agency in their communications with me. The study partnership benefited a great deal from the directors excellent ability to navigate their dual relationship.

Individual Interview Process

Field notes recorded immediately following each interview highlight several critical themes from the interview process. First, the interview protocol was a helpful tool to structure the discussion and insure that all three central topics of interest were addressed. The 90-minute timeframe for the interviews did allow enough time to explore these nine domains. However, the length of time spent in each interview addressing each domain varied between interviews, and not all questions in each domain were asked by the interviewer in every interview. This difference between interviews was due to the natural flow of a semi-structured interview.

Second, the role of insider/outsider of the interviewer had a strong influence on the interview experience. Prior knowledge of the theater arts and mental illness allowed for a common understanding at the outset of the interviews. Although this common understanding arguably facilitated a strong report with the participant and allowed for a more nuanced discussion, drawbacks were also noted. For one, the complexity of the interviewer’s questions was at times met with confusion by the participant and needed clarification. Third, a common experience occurred in several interviews wherein the interview interaction lead to a level of participant reflection and exploration not previously undertaken by the participant. This revelation was expressed with gratitude by participants. This experience occurred most often when the interviewer inquired about social activism, and ideas about future directions for the troupe.

Finally, contrary to some initial concern from the research team, the presence of the video
camera did not seem to inhibit the participants’ responses during the interviews. Several of the participants later commented that they quickly forgot that the camera was present.

**Focus Group Process**

Field notes recorded during and immediately following the focus group highlight several critical themes from the process of facilitating this group conversation. First, similar to the interview experience, having a protocol was helpful to move the discussion forward along the needed domains of interest. At no time did the meeting feel out of control, and the discussion seemed to flow comfortably from topic to topic. Having a research assistant to take notes during the focus group allowed me to remain entirely engaged on the discussion, and able to track content and participation. Second, one of the most powerful outcomes of the experience was having several troupe members comment that the focus group offered them a unique opportunity to discuss the troupe’s experiences, processes, hopes, and challenges as a group. They reported feeling it was an opportunity not usually available to them rehearsals and troupe meetings. Third, not all troupe members shared during the focus group to the same degree. For example, one participant in particular who had been very comfortable and articulate during her individual interview was surprisingly quiet through a good deal of the discussion. She contributed somewhat, but later explained that she was having a bad day and was not feeling very talkative. This emphasized to me the advantage of offering multiple opportunities to contribute narrative data to the study. As the focus group progressed, it became clear that some participants should be asked of their thoughts directly to make sure they were explicitly invited to contribute. The focus group ended up an invaluable opportunity for behavioral observation of troupe dynamics. Finally, later reflection indicated that completion of the individual interviews prior to the focus
group was a useful method. This approach allowed for a smooth follow up discussion on many topics addressed in the interviews.

**Member Checking Process**

Efforts to check the verisimilitude, completeness, and accuracy of findings with study participants themselves are an important feature of thorough qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This is especially true in the case of “member checking” in a grounded theory approach, where the strength of the findings is tied directly to their correlation with participants’ actual lived experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first phase of member checking with *The Stars of Light* involved reconnecting with the troupe’s directors, and planning a meeting time that would accommodate the most number of troupe members. Staying in contact with the troupe over the course of data collection and analysis helped facilitate this process. Next, a short, three-page summary report document was prepared specifically to help report findings to the troupe. This was initially quite challenging, given the number of emergent constructs and themes. The task of presenting the data was further complicated by the need to summarize complex ideas succinctly and in an understandable fashion. The presentation of findings was kept short, and copies of report documents were given to the troupe members for future reflection. This was done in order to offer the most amount of time possible for participants’ feedback and questions. Getting feedback from participants was an extremely rewarding experience. Feedback was generally very positive from the troupe. The participants reported that the findings were clear and understandable, and that they fit with their experiences very well. One of the most common comments was that the findings offered a coalescing of information that was known to the participants, but was not previously summarized and integrated in a helpful way. Another unexpected experience during the member checking
experience was hearing the participants repeat powerful comments and reflections they had
shared during the interviews and the focus group. These came up during the discussion of the
findings and stimulated a conversation about how these thoughts were incorporated into the
findings. The participants did not have any significant concerns, and only asked a few questions
about the coding process. In closing the discussion I made sure to share my contact information
in case there were further questions or concerns after the meeting.

Limitations

Although the present research worked to incorporate an established and widely used
qualitative research methodology, triangulation of data sources, and multiple coders, several
limitations should be addressed. First, the study is not longitudinal and did not track participant
experiences and attitudes over time. The data collection process did take several months to
complete, but the study was not designed to measure changes over time. Therefore the emergent
themes regarding developmental processes are present and retrospectively focused. Future
inquiry that partners with troupes like The Stars of Light may benefit from further one-on-one
interviewing, or some means of tracking individual participation and recovery trajectories over
time.

Another possible limitation was the inclusion of such a broad scope of topics and
domains within a single 90-minute interview protocol. Although this was sufficient to address all
the target domains to some extent, more time or fewer topics may have allowed for a richer
exploration of participant experiences. If more time where spent interviewing participants, more
detail may also be gleaned about participants’ specific life-course patterns and recovery
processes. This is turn may allow for a more complex articulation of factors related to
involvement and recovery as outlined in Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3.
Given the nature of the available sample of current and recent troupe members, another limitation could be the lack of a more extensive sample of previous troupe members. However, the troupe directors did not have previous member information organized and available; and limited access and self-selection may have biased such a sample. In addition, it could be considered a limitation that two of the troupe members who were interviewed individually were not able to attend the focus group. On the other hand, the fact that so many other members were in attendance speaks to the value of the data collected there, and it being representative of the entire troupe.

Finally, no efforts were made to check the accuracy of some of the archival data. For example, the history of the troupe’s community contacts was not corroborated through individual contacts with community organizations. The accuracy of this data was taken on faith from the troupe’s managing director. However, the fact that this data had been collected cumulatively over the course of the last 15 years, rather than retrospectively estimated, speaks to its validity. Future research may benefit from further data collection from other organizations to cross-check information and collect data regarding the impact of contacts with the theater troupe.

Recommendations

The present study identified a variety of emergent theoretical constructs regarding troupe process, challenges at the individual and troupe levels, community integration, and social change efforts of the troupe. Giving the wide array of issues raised earlier in this chapter it may be useful to translate components of the present findings into concrete recommendations. The following briefly summarizes various suggestions for mental health settings, theater settings, social activists, and future research.
Mental Health Settings

First, it may be helpful to inquire about creative arts interests and talents from both consumers and staff when starting to develop new theatrical initiatives within a mental health service setting. There may be preexisting, yet hidden, resources that could be pooled or activated. Second, mental health settings would do well to consider referrals and communication between established theater troupes and programs in the community and clinicians/staff that may enhance information about community resources for people living with psychiatric disabilities. Third, involvement in creative arts and performance may be a useful and underutilized tool in recovery for individuals under the care of mental health service agencies. It may be helpful to explore issues in treatment settings such as: artistic identity, creative drives, and creative arts communities in the lives of consumers. Fourth, structured programming for people with psychiatric disabilities is a critical aspect of care within mental health settings. However, findings from the present study suggest that flexibility in volunteer-based programming may also help consumers manage various other life goals (e.g., family, activism, employment). Finally, findings suggest that a theater troupe such as The Stars of Light may offer the opportunity for new creative forms of community outreach, as well as training within or between organizations.

Theater Settings

Present findings highlight the creative fortitude and capability of people with psychiatric disabilities to contribute to theatrical settings. Indeed, many who live with some form of disability may already be involved in a theater troupe or program. One recommendation is that directors and program managers of these troupes should consider how they might make their setting more inclusive and welcoming to people sharing personal narratives related to mental illness. Also, partnerships with consumers and consumer organizations may offer new means of
mutual benefit, enhancing supportive theater communities and building community bonds. In addition, by creating new setting for people living with psychiatric disabilities, theater troupes or programs may be able to contribute new paths toward social and community integration. Theatrical and performance environments may enhance personal growth for this population and compliment standard mental health and social services. Finally, directors and managers should also realize that finding various roles for consumers in their theatrical setting may not be very difficult; if there is effort given to exploring the entry points, volunteer positions, and inclusive nature of the organization or program.

Social Activism

Theatrical techniques, formats, and production styles may be an untapped source of capacity building for groups engaged in social activism. Present findings suggest that the flexible and malleable nature of theatrical activities can be used to engage public audiences of various kinds, including policy makers. Second, using humor seems to be a powerful means of engaging target audiences, and increasing emotional impact. Integrating humor and an interactive format for community dialogue may enhance a group’s efforts toward social change and activism. Third, the social change efforts of *The Stars of Light* present an example of how a group can tap broad, national ideals related to social inclusion and stigma reduction, while simultaneously connecting to local talent and organizational networks to effect change. Those involved in the disability rights movement may draw strength and new ideas from the sort of organizational networks created by troupes like *The Stars of Light*.

Future Inquiry

Although the present study addresses a wide variety of theoretical and practical issues, future inquiry could expand on the present research in several ways. First, present findings
suggest that artistic identity has meaningful links to recovery processes and the personal growth of people living with psychiatric disabilities. More research is needed to clarify these links and help create new methods and settings for consumers to take advantage of this relationship. More research is also needed that compares growth and outreach processes across other troupes similar to The Stars of Light. Similarities and differences between these troupes may help clarify and refine the theoretical constructs emergent in the present study. Further research may also help develop guides for the establishment of new troupes and arts initiatives. In reviewing the supportive literature for this study it became evident that the vast majority of research related to 1) community theater arts projects and marginalized groups, 2) the use of theater in alternative and educational settings, and 3) arts initiatives as a means of cultural community development is published by scholars from Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Why this might be is unclear. Future inquiry would do well to examine factors related to the socio-political, academic, or entertainment cultures of the United States that may be the cause of this geographically bound paucity of research.

Follow up research to the present study may benefit from several methodological elements. First, use of mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methodology might enhance the measurement of the impact of community performances on audiences’ stigmatizing attitudes, emotional impacts, and other reactions. Second, future research could use a longitudinal design that tracks personal growth variables, troupe dynamics and development, and community network growth over time. Third, future inquiry might benefit from data collection efforts that quantify the impact of involvement on troupe members lives. For example, researchers might include scales in their methods that measure constructs such as sense of community, empowerment, recovery development, and quality of life. Finally, future research could go
further in developing participatory action research (PAR) projects that involve more extended partnerships with community-based theater troupes involving people with psychiatric disabilities. These projects could help build organizational capacity and broader community impact through the sharing of data, as well as assist in implementing needed organizational changes or developing organizational networks between the public and private sectors. Ultimately, the benefit of enriched methodology and a more partnership-focused approach to future research would be to broaden theoretical understanding; while simultaneously offering valued, and empowered roles for people living with psychiatric disabilities.

Conclusion

The present qualitative study examined how a community-based theater troupe comprised of members living with psychiatric disabilities affects the lives of the participants and encourages second-order social change for this population. The study was successful in using a grounded theory approach to explore the social activism, group developmental processes, and characteristics of theatrical activities of *The Stars of Light*. The 18 emergent theoretical constructs emphasis the complex interactions between person, setting, and community involved in this sort of community-based arts initiative. Measurement of concrete examples of second-order change for people with psychiatric disabilities ultimately seems beyond the scope of the present study. However the present study is able to offer rich description of emergent constructs related to identity development, setting dynamics and trajectories, organizational linkages, and theater as a means of aiding the recovery processes. As more alternative community-based settings are developed involving people with psychiatric disabilities, findings from the present study may be drawn on to better integrate theatrical activities, enhance the community integration of consumers, and bolster system change efforts. As mental health consumers shift
from “patient” to “citizen” in the 21st century, theatrical activities may offer the opportunity to continue this transition to identities of artist, community teacher, and community leader.
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APPENDIX A.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

“Thank you for participating in this interview today. I will be asking you a series of questions today regarding your experience involving creative expression, theater, and performing. If you do not feel comfortable answering any of my questions please say so and we will skip them. You can also stop the interview at any time for any reason. The interview will focus on your experience with the theater troupe, asking you to answer questions about your artistic development as an actor and as a troupe, your efforts to educate and reach out to audiences about mental illness, and what you think about theater in general. Information about your personal background will allow me to understand your life and involvement in theater within a broader context. If any question I ask seems unclear, please tell me and I will try to clarify it for you. I will be taping the interview, and the interview will last no longer then 90 minutes today. Do you have any questions for me before I start video taping?”

(Topic: Social Activism)

(Individual level)

- How does creating theater that talks about the realities of mental illness and educates audiences impact your life?
- How has doing this kind of theater changed how you think of yourself?
- How do you know when you personally have impacted an audience’s ideas about mental illness?

(Troupe level)
• Tell me how the troupe talks about having succeeding in impacting audience members’ ideas about mental illness?

• How do you feel the troupes activities help inform others about the realities of coping with mental illness?

• How do think the troupe could improve it’s ability to impact audience members’ ideas about mental illness?

(Community level)

• How does the troupe work with other community organizations to impact community attitudes about mental illness?

• How do you think the troupe could work better with other community organizations to improve community attitudes?

• Tell me about any negative responses the troupe has received from audiences or other organizations?

(Topic: Developmental Processes)

(Individual Level)

• Tell me about how you first got involved with the troupe.

• Tell me about how you have personally changed while being involved with the troupe. (Follow up: regarding mental health? Social relationships? Changes felt as negative or regressive?, etc)

• How have your goals for the future changed since being involved in the troupe?

(Troupe level)

• How has the make up of the troupe changed over time?
• Tell me how the way you work as a team has changed over time.
• What are some challenges that the troupe has faced since it first came together?  

(Community level)
• How has the troupe’s relationship changed over time with the mental health service organizations in this area?
• How has the troupe changed the way it reaches out to the local community over time?
• How have audience responses to your performances changed over time? For good or ill?

(Topic: Characteristics of Theater)

(Individual level)
• What do you enjoy most about taking part in theater as opposed to other artistic activities?
• What do you find as particularly difficult about acting in theater? How is do you feel this is different than challenges you face taking part in other arts activities? or other areas of your life?
• What has being involved in theatrical performances helped you learn about yourself?

(Troupe level)
• Tell me about the troupe’s activities during rehearsals?
• How does the troupe decide on when to make a performance funny or serious?
• How do theatrical activities help make the troupe feel like a team working together? What activities do you find make it hard to work together as a team?

(Community level)

• What do you think it is about theater that works well to influence the attitudes of audience members, compared to other artistic forms?
• Of everything that the troupe does on stage, what do you think is the most powerful aspect for audiences?
• Tell me about any ways you think theater performances fail to affect audiences.
• Tell me about what it is like to perform for different types of audiences. (e.g. students vs. health professionals?)
APPENDIX B.

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

“Thank you for participating in this group discussion today. I will be facilitating the discussion today and this is (research assistant’s name here) who will be helping us out by taking notes. We will also be tape recording the discussion today just to make sure we can review exactly what was said if necessary. I will be raising a series of questions today regarding your experience involving creative expression, working with the troupe, and performing for the community. These questions will also focus on your personal and troupe development, and your thoughts on theater in general. I will summarize issues and ideas that are discussed up here on this white board to help us all keep track of what is discussed.

We really want everyone to feel comfortable contributing to the discussion. There are no right or wrong ideas here. We just want to know about your experience. If you do not feel comfortable talking about any of the questions raised today, that’s fine. You don’t have to talk unless you feel like it. The tape we record today will be kept confidential and we are not keeping track of who says what. Please share information about your personal background if you like; it will allow us to understand your life and involvement in theater within a broader context. If any question I ask seems unclear, please tell me and I will try to clarify it for you. (Research assistant’s name here) will be keeping track of time, and we will wrap up the discussion in 90 minutes. Do you have any questions for me before I start taping?”

Topics:

Social Activism

- What are your primary goals as a troupe in terms of advocacy and activism?
- How does the troupe interact with the local mental health care system, if at all?
- How are other organizations supportive? Not supportive?
  - What are some of the issues related to mental illness that you have presented on stage over the years?
  - Around what issues have you seen the most dramatic response from audiences?
  - In what way is it a struggle to connect with audiences?

**Developmental Processes**

- Tell me about how you first came together as a troupe.
- How have your primary goals changed over time?
- Tell me a little about your hopes for the future of the [troupe name]? 
- What has been the most challenging thing for your theater group as a whole in creating and performing theater?
- How does the group handle members having to drop out for various reasons?
  - What are some of these reasons?

**Characteristics of Theater**

- How do you see theater as a useful means of telling the wider community about mental illness?
- What are the unique aspects of theater, as opposed to other art forms, that make it effective in this way?
- What is limiting about the theatrical art form?
- What do you see as the advantage of having post-play discussions with the audience?
Tell me about some of the ways performing together has helped you get to know one another.
APPENDIX C.

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Consent Form

Purpose

You are invited to participate in a research project about the theatrical activities of the Thresholds Theater Arts Project. Through this project, we hope to learn about participants’ experiences taking part in a theatrical group that shares experiences of living with a mental illness, and working with other people creatively. The project also addresses how participation in theater can help individual participants feel more a part of their community, and how theater can influence audiences’ understanding of mental illness.

Procedure

You will be asked to participate in an individual interview that will last approximately 90 minutes and a focus group discussion with other members of the Thresholds Theater Arts Project that will also last approximately 90 minutes. From the interview, I hope to understand you as a
person better, and learn of your experience involving creative expression and theater. If you do not feel comfortable answering any of my questions please say so and we will skip them. You can also stop the interview at any time for any reason. I plan to videotape the interview so I can better recall what was said. Additionally, some segments of the interview may be used in a video about theater groups that may be seen by the public.

The interview will focus on your personal background, asking you to answer questions about

(1) your creative arts/ theatrical history
(2) your history of involvement with the Thresholds organization
(3) your history of involvement with the Thresholds Theater Arts Project
(4) different roles or identities that you have in the community
(5) your mental illness history
(6) your feeling about theater activities in general.

Information about your personal background will allow me to understand your life and involvement in theater within a broader context. I am interested in learning about your individual identity as a creative person, your skills, your personal goals, and how they have changed over the years.

From the focus group, I hope to understand your work together as a theater troupe and about your experiences performing for audiences in the wider community. The focus group will be audio-taped, and notes will be taken about what is discussed by all the members of the troupe.
If you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions asked during the focus group, you do not have to say anything.

**Risks**

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life should you consent to be interviewed. However, if you additionally consent to have your image used for a video that could be seen by the public, you will be identified as someone who is coping with a mental illness. Because of stigma associated with mental illness, you may face unfair discrimination as a result of being identified as someone who is coping with a mental illness.

**Benefits**

This project may benefit you by offering you an opportunity to share your life experiences and ideas with others. You may also benefit from the opportunity to make comments on how you feel about your experience as a member of the Thresholds Theater Arts Project, and a creator/performer. It is also hoped that this interview will help you to enrich your own understanding of your life as you tell it to me. This project may benefit the greater community by helping people to better understand the process of creating grassroots theater, and the strengths of people who are coping with a mental illness.

**Confidentiality**
Any information obtained in this project with which you can be personally identified will remain confidential and secure. Pseudonyms will be used in any reports made available to the public in the future. In addition, you can choose to have a pseudonym used if you agree to have your image included a video that can be seen by the public.

**Compensation or Treatment**

Bowling Green State University does not provide medical treatment or any other forms of compensation or reimbursement to persons injured as a result of or in connection with participation in projects conducted by Bowling Green State University or its faculty, staff, or students.

**Your Rights as a Participant**

You are free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time. As a participant you have the right to have all questions concerning the video answered by me, the project coordinator, and may request a summary or copy of the project’s products after its completion. If you have any questions or comments about this project, you can contact me, David Faigin at (419) 372-4403, dfaigin@bgsu.edu, or Dr. Catherine Stein, my project advisor, at (419) 372-2301, cstein@bgsu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant please contact the Chairperson of the Human Subjects Review Board, 201 South Hall, Bowling Green State University (419) 372-7716, hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu.

You are under **no obligation** to participate in this video project.
PART 1:

Your signature indicates that you are 1) over the age of 18; 2) you are able to give legal consent; 3) you have read the information provided above; 4) agree to voluntarily participate in an individual interview that will be videotape recorded, and a focus group discussion with other troupe members that will audio-tape recorded. Your signature indicates that you are ONLY consenting to have your responses included anonymously in a final written report.

______________________________________________                 ____________
Signature of Participant                     Date

______________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Witness       Date

PART 2:

Your signature below indicates that you are 1) over the age of 18; 2) you are able to give legal consent; 3) you have read the information provided above; 4) agree to voluntarily participate in an individual interview that will be videotape recorded;
5) aware that parts of the videotape may be used in a longer documentary that are distributed publicly. THIS WILL IDENTIFY YOU AS SOMEONE COPING WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS.

If and when images or information about you is shared publicly, images and/or information may be used in conjunction with:

_Chek one:_ ☐ Your own name  ☐ A fictitious name  ☐ No name to be used

______________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Participant                      Date

______________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Witness                          Date

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.