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# PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY IN COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTERS

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*Professional community mental health workers want considerable autonomy in doing their work, but too much autonomy can lead to frustration and less satisfaction with work. This finding of a study of 93 mental health professionals in three community mental health centers is in sharp contrast with a comparison group of 60 professionals in a chemical plant. The article cautions against the direct translation of research on all professionals to community mental health professionals.*

Professional community mental health workers are commonly thought to have considerable freedom in doing their work. Feldman (1975) refers to community mental health centers (CMHCs) as ships without captains because of the difficulties that administrators have in controlling the work of their employees. Some CMHC professionals appear to operate on a private practice psychotherapy model and have little identification with the CMHC and its organizational goals.

The importance of work autonomy for producing productivity and satisfaction in both professional and non-professional employees is well established in the organizational literature. The primary proponents are Hackman and Oldham (1974, 1975, 1976), who have developed an assessment instrument, the Job Descriptive Index, which is widely

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used around the world. The results in numerous reports have confirmed the importance of having high work autonomy especially among employees who desire enriched, growth-producing jobs.

Professional CMHC employees should conform to these well established assumptions. In theory, autonomy is the key feature of all professional practice with the medical profession as the prototype for others (Friedson, 1971; Larson, 1977). In settings such as CMHCs, where jobs cannot easily be routinized and directed by rules manuals, management theories suggest hiring professionals who are educated to make decisions based upon general knowledge and professional values (Ketterer and Buffum, 1980; Buffum and Ritvo, 1984). Sarason (1977) points out that professional careers are viewed, albeit inaccurately at times, as the route to escape the drudgeries of routine jobs and to achieve all of the ideals of the good life.

With this well documented principle in hand, two prominent mental health researchers applied the Job Descriptive Index to a study of CMHCs and, surprisingly, did not find a significant relationship between work autonomy and job satisfaction (Sarata and Jeppesen, 1977). In fact, the association was no where near achieving statistical significance. How can this be explained? Is this result a statistical accident or is there something unique about CMHC professionals?

One possibility is that the relationship between work autonomy and job satisfaction may not be linear. For example, work autonomy could be a positive force up to a point, but too much autonomy might result in lack of direction, little supervisory feedback, loss of team spirit, and a reduced sense of one's own professional accomplishments. CMHC professionals might have too much autonomy in relation to the ambiguities inherent in their work.

Another possibility is that there are important differences between CMHCs and the business and industrial organizations which have been the settings for almost all of the previous research on this subject. Maloof (1975) cautions about this very possibility, and Kouzes and Mico (1979) suggest

that the client service orientation of human services professionals may reduce the impact of work autonomy. They argue that professionals who are client-service oriented may achieve their satisfactions through this service and, therefore, be less affected by organizational constraints upon their autonomy.

A final consideration is that the findings of Sarata and Jeppesen are confounded by problems in measurement. They, like Hackman and Oldham, assume that work autonomy is a unidimensional concept that can be measured by using a global scale to capture its meaning. Although this approach is attractive because of its simplicity, the global approach to measurement is probably inaccurate. Logically, one may feel considerable autonomy in some aspects of work, and have little autonomy in others. Global scales require that the respondent make an overall judgment about diverse dimensions, and each person may do this in a unique way.

The purpose of the present study was to gain a greater understanding about work autonomy in CMHCs and to explain the discrepant findings of Sarata and Jeppesen (1977). To accomplish this, the following hypotheses were examined:

1. *CMHC professionals have significantly more work autonomy than comparably educated non-human service professionals in private enterprise.*
2. *The association between work autonomy and job satisfaction is not as strong for CMHC professionals as for professionals in private enterprise.*
3. *The multi-dimensional measurement of work autonomy is a significantly more powerful predictor of job satisfaction than is a global measure.*

Through the examination of these key hypotheses, greater understanding of the concept of work autonomy and its unique role among CMHC professionals were sought.

## METHODOLOGY

### Concepts and Measurement

*Global work autonomy* refers to the amount of discretion that one has in doing one's job. If employees can function independently, without constraints, then they have high

work autonomy. Conversely, if they have numerous constraints, they have low work autonomy. This global conceptualization assumes that workers make overall assessments of their jobs, which results in a summary judgment about the amount of work autonomy that they experience.

Since jobs have several dimensions (McCormick, 1976), workers could experience high autonomy in some aspects of their jobs and low autonomy in others. Thus, it is important to consider work autonomy as it is found in specific dimensions of jobs. Aiken and Hage (1966) draw our attention to the concept of *formalization*, which they define as the "degree of work standardization and the amount of deviation that is allowed from standard" (p. 499). Formalization is itself comprised of several dimensions, according to Aiken and Hage. These are (a) *job codification*, which refers to the degree to which the work is regulated by policies and procedures, (b) *rule observation*, referring to the degree to which work is monitored for rule compliance, (c) *rules manual*, which refers to the presence of a rules manual which applies to the work, (d) *job description*, referring to the degree to which there is a complete written summary of the job, and (e) *specificity of job description*, referring to the extent to which there are explicit expectations which prescribe performance.

While formalization refers to externally derived constraints on autonomy, there are also constraints which are inherent in the work itself. Some jobs are routine, while others seemingly have little repetitiveness either because of the diversity of clients or because of the variety of intervention approaches employed. Perrow (1967) uses the term *technological routinization* to refer to the number of exceptions recognized in the raw materials of work, and Glisson (1978) adds that the uniformity of the incorporated intervention and problem-solving procedures is also a component of this concept.

Another dimension which is critical to work autonomy is *participation in decision making*. Meaningful participation requires influence, and this concept refers to the degree to which power, both formal positional power and informal in-

fluence, is concentrated (Buffum and Holland, 1980). Conceptually, the rationale for arguing that participation in decision-making is a dimension of work autonomy is that a critical aspect of autonomy is the ability to have a sense of control over the conditions of one's work. One cannot have a high degree of work autonomy without also having a high degree of control over one's work.

The theoretical model of Hackman and Oldham (1976) holds that work autonomy has an effect on productivity, turnover, absenteeism, and job satisfaction. Because the focus of the present study was work autonomy, only job satisfaction was included as a dependent variable. This decision was made because of the researcher's prior work with this variable (Buffum, 1981). *Job satisfaction* refers to the degree to which employees have a positive affective orientation towards their work, as it is accomplished within an organizational context (Price and Mueller, 1986; Locke, 1976). Job satisfaction is generally considered to be a multidimensional concept, with five of the potential dimensions receiving the greatest attention. These are satisfaction with 1. the *work itself*, 2. the *pay*, 3. the *promotional opportunities*, 4. *co-worker relationships*, and 5. the *supervision* (Dunham and Smith, 1979).

#### Research Design and Analysis Plan

This research employed a cross-sectional survey approach, but added a comparison group of professional chemists to a sample of community mental health professionals. The model called for testing the significance of relationships in both samples, and then testing for differences between the groups. These differences were assessed with simple t-tests, the Fisher's Z to test for the significance of the difference between the strengths of the associations among variables (Guilford and Fruchter, 1978). Fisher's Z is used when coefficients of correlation are uncorrelated, as in this situation in which there are two correlations between the same two variables derived from two different, unmatched samples.

Next, a series of multiple regressions using hierarchical designs were used to examine the contributions of the inde-

pendent variables on the dimensions of job satisfaction. First, decision-making influence, formalization, and technological routinization were entered at step one. Next, global work autonomy was entered. This was done separately for each of the five job satisfaction dimensions and separately for the two sampled groups. This approach made it possible to see the unique effects of global autonomy on job satisfactions after the hypothesized autonomy dimensions were removed. The residual effect of global work autonomy was not expected to be significant.

### Measurement

Global work autonomy was measured using Oldham and Hackman's original Overall Autonomy and Job Responsibility Scale from their Job Descriptive Index (1974). Based on the work of Aiken and Hage (1966), a new Scale of Decision-Making Influence was developed. This scale has ten items which tap both participation and influence in decision-making, and produce satisfactory reliability estimates with this sample. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was .87 and the Spearman-Brown split-half coefficient was .77. The appendix contains summary statistics for this scale.

Technological routinization was measured using another new scale which was based on the work of Lynch (1974) and Glisson (1978). This Work Predictability Scale had twelve items which were selected to capture the major aspects of professional technologies on a routine to non-routine continuum. A factor analysis of this scale revealed that two items did not load with the others. These two items were separated and interpreted as a measure of clarity in knowing the precise applications of a technology in various situations. The two-item scale was called Technology Applicability, and had an alpha reliability estimate of .52. The remaining eight items in the Work Predictability Index, which were referred to as the Routine Technology Scale, had acceptable alpha reliability ( $\alpha = .77$ ) and corrected split-half reliability ( $r = .52$ ).

Formalization was measured using the basic items in the Aiken and Hage index (1969). Slight modifications were

made in the fifteen item, five scale index with no apparent compromise of the index's reliability as reported by Dewar, Whetten, and Boje (1980). The appendix contains summary statistics for these scales.

The dependent variable, job satisfaction, was measured using the Job Satisfaction Index, which is based on the widely used Job Descriptive Index (Smith, et al., 1969) and developed by Holland, et al. (1981). The five index scales have been shown to have better reliability than the original JDI (Buffum and Konick, 1981).

### Samples

The respondents in this study were 93 professional employees in four community mental health centers and 60 professionals in a single chemical laboratory. All of the professional mental health employees in the CMHCs were included, and the response rate was over 95 percent. The CMHCs were purposively selected to represent a diversity in size of budget, number of staff, and urban-rural mix. The professional chemical laboratory employees were a convenience sample from a single company. They were selected simply to provide a point of reference when examining the CMHC sample. By major demographic characteristics, the two groups were not significantly different, and all research sites were located in a single-mid-western state. The response rate for the chemical company professionals was similar to that of the CMHC group, the high return due largely to the presence of the investigator at each field site for one to two days.

### RESULTS

The first hypothesis suggested that there would be a difference in work autonomy between community mental health and chemical company professionals. Indeed, the two groups did differ significantly on the global work autonomy measure with the CMHC professionals scoring higher than the Chemical plant group,  $t = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ . Having a maximum score of 5.0, the mean scores for both groups were seemingly high,

$x = 4.24$  &  $4.06$ . Examining the hypothesized specific dimensions of work autonomy, the two groups again differed significantly in the predicted directions on the Scale of Decision-Making Influence,  $t = 2.12$ ,  $p < .05$ , and on the Routine Technology Scale,  $t = -2.45$ ,  $p < .05$ . The CMHC professionals perceived themselves to have greater decision making influence and less routineness in their work technologies than did the chemical plant professionals. Interestingly, the two groups did differ significantly on any of the Formalization Index scales. Table 1 summarizes these data.

Next, the strength of the associations between global work autonomy and job satisfactions were examined by comparing the zero-order Pearson correlation coefficients produced from the two groups. Indeed, using this global work autonomy measure, the two groups did differ significantly on two of the five Job Satisfaction Index scales, Opportunities for Promotion,  $z = 2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ , and Supervision,  $z = 1.66$ ,  $p < .05$ . In both instances, the association was weaker in the CMHC group than in the chemical plant group. As can be seen in Table 2, the magnitude of the differences between correlation coefficients is substantial for all of the Job Satisfaction Index scales. The approach used to determine significance was conservative, and a more liberal approach would show the other correlation differences to be meaningful. The job satisfactions of CMHC professionals seem less affected by global work autonomy than the satisfactions of their chemical plant counterparts, except for satisfaction with co-workers where the pattern is reversed. Only this latter finding does not support the second hypothesis.

The third hypothesis of this research was that the global work autonomy concept is actually a complex conceptualization comprised of several dimensions, notably participation in decision-making, technological routinization and formalization. To test this hypothesis, the method of multiple regression was used. First, a regression model was designed to determine the extent to which the dimensions accounted for the variance in global work autonomy. This was done sepa-

TABLE 1

MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND SIGNIFICANCE TESTS  
FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN  
93 CMHC PROFESSIONALS AND 60 CHEMICAL COMPANY  
PROFESSIONALS

Scale	CMHC		Chemists		Tests	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F <sup>1</sup>	t <sup>2</sup>
Global Work Autonomy	4.24	.512	4.06	.565	1.22	2.02*
Decision Making Influence	3.72	.594	3.05	.674	1.29	2.12*
Work Predictability						
- Routine Technology	2.39	.595	2.64	.628	1.12	-2.45*
- Technology Applicability	3.84	.615	3.77	.639	1.08	.68
Formalization						
- Job Codification	2.98	.634	3.12	.701	1.22	-1.24
- Rule Observation	1.75	.685	1.91	.548	1.56	-1.57
- Specificity of Job Description	2.74	.565	2.75	.487	1.35	-.14
- Rule Manual	2.91	1.061	2.71	.911	1.36	1.23
- Job Description	3.12	1.041	2.85	1.260	1.46	1.37
Job Satisfaction						
- The Work Itself	3.90	.493	3.90	.571	1.34	.02
- The Pay	2.86	.844	3.03	.642	1.73*	-1.37
- Opportunities for Promotion	2.94	.645	3.03	.788	1.49	-.71
- The Supervision	3.89	.638	3.68	.636	1.01	1.99*
- Co-Worker Relations	4.10	.526	3.59	.556	1.12	5.64**

\* p < .05    \*\* p < .01

<sup>1</sup>F-test of the homogeneity of variances

<sup>2</sup>t-test of the significance of the difference between means (two tailed)

rately for each group. The result was that the dimensions accounted for a high portion of the variance in global work autonomy in both groups, 43% in the CMHC employee group and 63% in the chemical company group,  $R^2(6,90) = .43$  and  $R^2(6,57) = .63$ . Next, the hierarchical regression model was used to determine the contribution of global work autonomy to job satisfactions after the dimensions were entered. Again, this was done separately for both employee groups. The result was that the increments in  $R^2$  due to the addition of global work autonomy after entering the dimensions were not significant in any instance. These results are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 2  
TESTS OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN  
CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BETWEEN  
GLOBAL WORK AUTONOMY AND JOB SATISFACTIONS

Job Satisfactions	Group	Pearson r	Fisher's z	Sdz <sup>1</sup>	z <sup>2</sup>
The Work Itself	CMHC	.494	.542	.169	1.04ns
	Chem.	.611	.718		
The Pay	CMHC	.162	1.63	.171	1.47ns
	Chem.	.392	.414		
Opportunities for Promotion	CMHC	.325	.337	.171	2.05*
	Chem.	.597	.687		
The Supervision	CMHC	.390	.412	.169	1.66*
	Chem.	.598	.233		
Co-Worker Relations	CMHC	.434	.465	.169	1.37 ns
	Chem.	.229	.233		

\*  $p < .05$

<sup>1</sup> Standard error of the difference between Fisher's Zs

<sup>2</sup> Standardized z scores with significance levels using a two-tailed test

TABLE 3

INCREMENTS IN MULTIPLE COEFFICIENTS OF DETERMINATION  
DUE TO GLOBAL WORK AUTONOMY IN THE PRESENCE OF  
EIGHT SPECIFIC DIMENSIONS OF WORK AUTONOMY

JOB SATIS- FACTION	R <sup>2</sup> with 8 Specific Dimensions	r <sup>2</sup> With Only Global Dimensions	R <sup>2</sup> With All 9 Dimensions	R <sup>2</sup> Incre- ment	F Ratio*
<b>The Work Itself</b>					
CMHC	.468	.244	.488	.020	ns
Chemists	.606	.373	.607	.001	ns
<b>The Pay</b>					
CMHC	.122	.026	.133	.011	ns
Chemists	.359	.154	.393	.034	ns
<b>The Opportunities for Promotions</b>					
CMHC	.315	.106	.319	.004	ns
Chemists	.491	.356	.520	.029	ns
<b>The Supervision</b>					
CMHC	.478	.152	.479	.001	ns
Chemists	.609	.358	.618	.009	ns
<b>The Co-Workers</b>					
CMHC	.281	.188	.312	.031	ns
Chemists	.358	.052	.387	.029	ns

\* The F-Ratio tests the significance of the increment in R<sup>2</sup> due to the addition of Global Work Autonomy to the predictive model.

The sample size for the CMHC respondents was 93; and for the chemist group, it was 60.

## DISCUSSION

Although complaints are commonly heard from community mental health employees about bureaucratic constraints on their work autonomy, this study shows that they actually perceive themselves to have greater autonomy than one professional comparison group from private enterprise. Certainly this evidence is not overwhelming and could be a result of the unique characteristics of the chemical company professionals; but it is one piece of evidence which challenges traditional assumption.

Another finding which adds to this understanding is that both global work autonomy and the specific dimensions of autonomy have a substantially weaker relationship with job satisfactions in the CMHC professional group than in the chemical company professional group. Although substantially stronger than the  $-.02$  correlation between work autonomy and job satisfaction reported by Sarata and Jeppesen (1977), there seems to be some consistent differences between the way that work autonomy affects CMHC professionals and the way it affects private sector professionals. One possibility is that work autonomy is important to both groups, but CMHC employees to a greater extent derive their satisfactions from other sources. This explanation is supported by the stronger pattern in the CMHC group between autonomy and satisfaction with co-workers. Presumably, CMHC professionals are oriented toward interpersonal relationships, while chemical company professionals are more oriented toward the technological procedures and non-human products. Constraints on work autonomy which affect co-worker relations, and one might also speculate about worker-client relations, are more important to the CMHC professionals. This interpretation would speak well for the human orientations of CMHC professionals and their willingness to maintain job satisfaction in the face of organizational constraints.

That participation in decision-making, technological routinization and formalization, which were conceptually considered to be dimensions of work autonomy, are better

predictors of job satisfactions than global work autonomy is not surprising if only because of the greater predictive capacity of three (actually eight) variables than one variable. Yet, that global work autonomy drops out of the predictive model when the dimensions are entered first does suggest that the global concept is less useful than is the dimensional approach. The global approach obscures the reasons for differences between sampled groups, while the dimensional approach allows one to examine the differing contributions of various constraints upon a dependent variable.

One major caution in accepting these results is that the sampled groups are not random and may not be generalizable. Conservatively, the finding of this research should be considered to be initial evidence that there are important differences between CMHC professionals and professionals in industry such that caution should be exercised in generalizing the results of research in business and industry to community mental health programs.

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## APPENDIX

## SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR NEW MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS\*

## Scale of Decision Making Influence

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Number of Items: 12                      Alpha Reliability: .87  
 Response Format: 5 Point Likert      Corrected Split-Half: .77  
 Scale Mean: 3.61                        Scale Variance: .435  
 Evidence of Validity: Accurately discriminated among job levels  
 ( $F(3,159) = 4.6, p < .001$ ), and organizations  
 ( $F(4,159) = 2.4, p < .05$ ).

## Routine Technology Scale

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Number of Items: 8                      Alpha Reliability: .77  
 Response Format: 5 Point Likert      Corrected Split-Half: .73  
 Scale Mean: 2.59                        Scale Variance: 1.213  
 Evidence of Validity: Accurately predicts associations between  
 global work autonomy ( $r = -.25, P. < .001$ ),  
 decision making influence ( $r = -.29, P. < .001$ ), and satisfaction with work ( $r = -.16,$   
 $p. < .05$ ). Loads on separate factor from  
 Technology Applicability Scale.

## Technology Applicability Scale

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Number of Items: 2                      Alpha Reliability: .52  
 Response Format: 5 Point Likert      Corrected Split-Half: .52  
 Scale Mean: 3.83                        Scale Variance: .568  
 Evidence of Validity: Accurately predicts associations between global  
 work autonomy ( $r = .39, p. < .001$ ), decision  
 making influence ( $r = .36, p. < .001$ ), and satis-  
 faction with work ( $r = -.39, p. < .001$ ). Loads  
 on separate factor from the Routine Technology  
 Scale.

## FORMALIZATION INDEX

	Job Codifi- cation	Rule Obser- vation	Rule Manual	Specificity of Job Description	Job Descrip- tion
Number of Items:	5	2	1	6	1
Response Format:	All have 5 item Likert formats				
Scale Mean:	3.03	1.80	2.90	2.78	3.05
Scale Variance:	.489	.391	1.093	.288	1.346
Alpha Reliability:	.77	.75	NA	.47	NA
Corrected Split-Half:	.76	.76	NA	.42	NA
Evidence of Validity:	The scales have construct validity as is evidenced by weak inter-scale correlations.				
Rule Observation:	.01	—			
Rule Manual:	-.23	-.25	—		
Specificity of Job Description:	.11	.12	.00	—	
Job Description:	-.31	.27	.32	.10	—

\* Results from 175 professionals in four Community Mental Health Centers and a chemical plant. Scale items are available from the author.