IMPACT OF HEALTH SYSTEM ENGAGEMENT ON THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS: A REALIST REVIEW

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Background

Context

People who use drugs (PWUD) choose to get involved in health system improvement (advocacy, service planning, research, front line work) for a variety of reasons. Community-level benefits of meaningful health system engagement are well established; however, the individual-level health impacts on PWUD are less explored. We aimed to uncover how, why, and under what circumstances positive and negative health outcomes occur during health system engagement by PWUD.
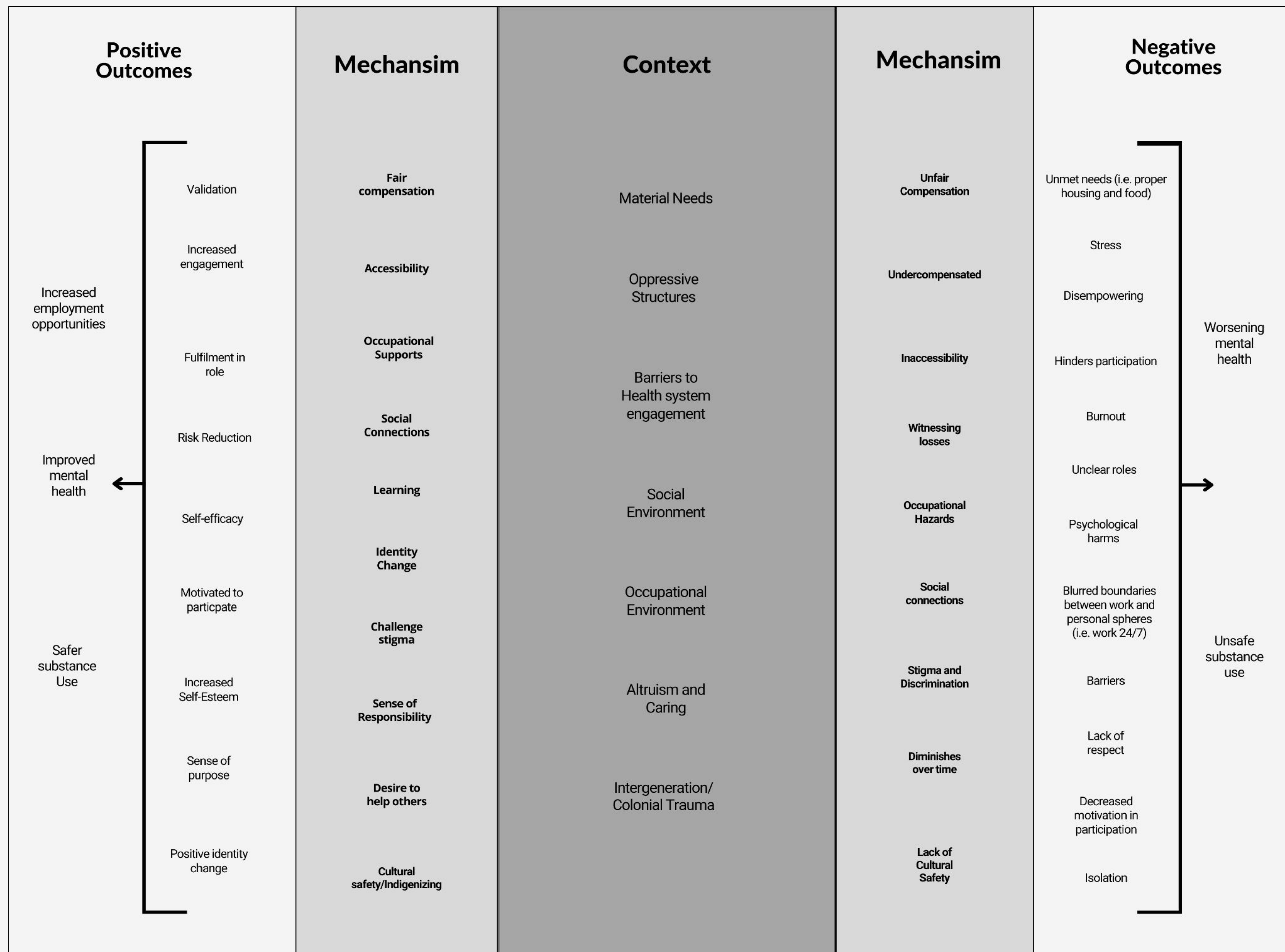
Objective

1) Explore how engagement in healthcare outside of the patient-provider relationship (e.g. through health system planning, delivery, advocacy, and research) influences the health and well-being of PWUD.

2) Develop best practice recommendations for engaging PWUDs, to better their health and well-being and minimize negative impacts through facilitating changes within the health system.

Design

A realist review was conducted to identify mechanisms (i.e., intermediary processes) to explain how programs within a context (i.e., environment or pre-existing state) work or fail to produce the expected outcome of health.

After the initial development of the program theory — an initial model of how health engagement is thought to achieve its impacts — articles from the literature focusing on health systems engagement and the well-being of PWUD were gathered and data abstracted into contexts (C), mechanisms (M), and outcomes (O).

The CMOs were categorized into key themes. The initial program theory was revised iteratively through consultation with clinical and academic content experts and a traditional knowledge keeper. PWUD with lived experiences of health system engagement contributed to all stages of this review.

Fig 1. An overview of the current revised program theory. Here, the CMOs originate within the center, emanating towards the left and right sides. Within a context, mechanisms can lead to certain consequences, further leading to broader outcomes such as increased engagement or mental health problems.

Findings

85 research articles and five theories were included in the emerging program theory. Key themes overlap with the socio-ecological framework and include the value of learning opportunities, altruism and caring, risk of psychological harm, benefit of peer support, and need for social connection, accessibility, compensation, and a stigma-free environment.

Recommendations for healthy engagement include fair compensation, opportunities for development, clear role definition and expectations, and access to psychological and cultural supports.

Conclusions

The macro-meso-micro level context exerts an influence on the engagement process and can create health or harm. Healthy engagement for PWUD depends on social, structural, and cultural support, clear role definition, and an anti-oppressive engagement environment that fosters personal development.

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