

“New life” : Study of a Japanese self-help group for alcoholics

Tomofumi Oka, PhD, Sophia University, Tokyo
Richard Chenhall, PhD, University of Melbourne, Melbourne

Findings and discussion

While current understanding about recovery from alcoholism has been heavily influenced by concepts from Alcoholics Anonymous, in the case of Danshukai it is important to understand the cultural context of this alcohol self-help group in Japan. While the early creators of Danshukai in the 1950s were influenced by certain parts of Alcoholics Anonymous, such as the importance of attending meetings where alcoholics share their stories about the damaging effects of alcohol misuse, other elements were viewed as inappropriate in Japanese contexts. This included the concept of higher power and the focus on the individual alcoholic in meetings. Furthermore, the concepts related to the cathartic effect of speaking in meetings and revelations associated with handing one's power over to God are not emphasized in the recovery process in Danshukai. Rather, Danshukai members concept of “new life,” first articulated in the 1950s, was developed under Japanese cultural contexts, including Japanese Buddhism and Zen. According to this concept, “practice” is more important than “theory” to enable members to lead sober lives. A new life is achieved by attending meetings, not drinking and engaging in the spirit (*seishin*) of Danshukai's principles articulated in its abstinence pledge, Danshu-no-chikai. (See below)

Seishin has been variously defined but is a cultural concept referring to an inner being where mind, body and soul are united. Practicing *seishin* has been described in various contexts from the martial arts to school rugby in Japan and is underpinned by a belief that personal development and spiritual training entails individual suffering. At the core of this development is a concept of “no mindedness” where an individual should strive to achieve harmony through physical, rather than intellectual effort (Moeran, 1984). Similar to principles of Zen Buddhism the cultivation of self-discipline and “will” in self-help groups, such as Danshukai, is achieved through a regime of regular attendance of meetings. An alcoholic must give up their normal routines and instead attend Danshukai meetings whenever possible. Some meetings last for three hours, other special weekend *danshu gakko* [abstinence school] meetings might last for three days and involve long periods of sitting and listening to other alcoholics tell their stories about the harms caused in their life from their alcoholism. Similar to other forms of therapy in Japan (Reynolds, 1980), such as Morita therapy, Danshukai members do not consider it necessary to analyze unconscious conflicts behind their alcoholism to allow for the expression of hidden feelings, as in western psychoanalysis. Danshukai members should not “think,” rather the emphasis is placed on practice, which involves simply attending Danshukai meetings regularly. Through devotion to such practice, a member's “new life” will emerge.

As the medical treatment of alcoholism has become more popular in Japan over the last 30 years, and medical doctors and other professionals have exerted their influence within self-help groups, Danshukai's explanatory frameworks have been increasingly influenced by the disease model of alcoholism. Consequently, Danshukai members now often discuss their “medical recovery” (*kaifuku*), rather than the need to construct “new lives” (*shinsei*). While the medicalization of alcohol problems has lead to reductions in the stigma associated with alcoholism in Japan, it has also individualized the problem, seeing very little need for the role of mutual help groups, including other alcoholics and family members. We would encourage Danshukai organizations to become stronger advocates for articulating their own models of recovery that are viewed as specific and relevant for Japanese people with alcohol problems.



Note: The closing ceremony of a Danshukai meeting. The Danshukai members and their families shout the common phrase while raising their linked hands up and down. This ceremony is conducted in large meetings only. On the stage the flag of Zendanren [the National Alliance of Danshukai] and a picture of the late founder of Zendanren, Harushige Matsumura, are seen.

Introduction

In Japan, there is a nationwide self-help organization for alcoholics called Danshukai [abstinence group], which was established over half a century ago. This organization comprises approximately nine thousand members all over Japan— almost double the number of Alcoholics Anonymous members in Japan. Their program substantially differs from that of Alcoholics Anonymous and is viewed by members as drawing on elements of Japanese culture to assist in the recovery of participants. The purpose of this study is to describe how members of Danshukai understand and conceptualize their pathways to leading sober lives, and how their understanding has been influenced by the disease model of alcoholism.

Methods

In this study, we employed ethnographic methods. Since the end of 2006, we made participant observations of regular local meetings and nationwide and regionwide meetings, and conducted conversational and semi-structured interviews with their leaders, members, and the families of the members (Chenhall & Oka, 2009; Oka, 2011). We also examined documents included in newsletters and booklets published by the national headquarters and several local groups. We repeatedly ensured that our findings were member validated by asking the leaders and members to examine our hypothesis.



Note: A large meeting of a local Danshukai. Two vertical banners are commonly seen in Danshukai's large meetings. The right one states *ichinichi-danshu* [Abstinence for a day], and the left one states *reikai-shusseki* [Attending meetings]. The green horizontal banner at the center of the front says Danshu-dōjō. “Dōjō” means a place for discipline.

References

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Note: A small meeting of a local Danshukai. The flag of their local Danshukai is seen. The wives of alcoholics sit together separately from their husbands.



Note: Two flags are placed at the front of a Danshukai meeting. One, to the left, showing the emblem of Danshukai and the name of the group. To the right, the Abstinence Pledge is placed.

Danshu-no-chikai [Abstinence Pledge of Danshukai]
We admit that we have been powerless over alcohol, and that we have been unable to control it through our own power. We will attend Danshukai, and talk about ourselves honestly. We will examine our drunken experiences, and recognize our past mistakes frankly. We will make effort to improve ourselves, and create a new life. We will make amends to those people we have harmed as well as our families. We will commend the delight of abstinence to people who suffer from alcoholism.

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Correspondence concerning this poster should be addressed to Tomofumi Oka. Department of Social Services, Sophia University, Kioi-cho, Chiyoada-ku, Tokyo, 102-8554, Japan.
Email: t-oka@sophia.ac.jp