

(1)

1993 WORLD CONGRESS: WORLD FEDERATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH
1993.8.26.14:10-15:50

THE CONCEPT OF SELF-HELP GROUPS IN MENTAL HEALTH SHARING, INDEPENDENCE, AND EMANCIPATION

Oka, T., Dept. of Social Welfare, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan.

Ladies and Gentlemen. I am very privileged to be allowed to speak here about the concept of self-help groups.

This presentation has three parts.

First, a discussion of how important it is to consider the concept of self-help groups in the Japanese cultural context.

Second, how to build the concept of self-help groups in the Japanese cultural context.

Third, an explanation of the basic qualities of self-help groups.

The first question is, why is it important to consider the concept of self-help groups in the context of Japanese culture.

One of the reasons is the fact that self-help groups play a very important role in users' movements. Self-help groups are not professionally-led groups, but the users' own groups. This means that users should have a clear understanding of self-help groups and be able to apply it.

Users may have created their support networks without any clear notion of self-help groups. However, if they have no clear understanding of self-help groups, they cannot effectively develop self-help movements. They need a clear notion or concept of self-help groups to promote their movements independently of professionals.

However, present concepts of self-help groups were produced in Western culture. Although Japanese people have a lot of self-help groups, they have not built concepts of self-help groups. Their concepts about their groups are particular and specific. They are neither universal nor applicable to other sorts of self-help groups.

Western concepts of self-help groups are sometimes too western to be easily used by Japanese self-help groups and users. Western culture is very different from Japanese culture at many points, for example, the ideas about society, and the roles of individuals.

Translation of cultural concepts is not easy. Therefore, we need to develop the concept of self-help groups in a cross-cultural context.

The second question is, how to find the concept of self-help groups which is effective in Japanese culture? To do this, let's consider guidelines.

First, concepts are made of words. Concepts effective in a culture are to be made of words effective in the culture. Although the Japanese language is full of words borrowed from other languages, not only Western languages, but also Chinese, we don't necessarily find such borrowed words effective in Japanese culture. Therefore, pure Japanese words ("Wa-Go") should be used to describe the concepts of self-help groups.

Second, such pure Japanese words should be chosen not from dictionaries, but from the well-used vocabulary of Japanese self-help groups.

Third, look for cross-cultural universal concepts of self-help groups, not particular, specific Japanese ones; describe these universal concepts in pure Japanese words. Today's popular concepts of self-help groups have been based only on research on Western self-help groups. Therefore, those concepts may be too western and not universal enough to be easily appropriated by Japanese users.

Fourth, the concepts of self-help groups should be not only descriptive but also prescriptive, because they are used to develop behavior. Therefore, they should include goals and purposes of self-help groups, even those which are likely to be obstructed by Japanese culture.

Fifth, the concepts should be simple, because people who will use them do so without professional help.

Therefore, the concept of self-help groups in three pure Japanese words might be: "wakachiai" (which means spontaneous sharing), "hitoridachi" (which means individual independence) and "tokihanachi"

(which means emancipation from suppression).

Following is a brief description of what these three Japanese words point to.

First, "wakachiai" (spontaneous sharing) is the most important and basic process of self-help groups. Though "wakachiai," people spontaneously share their feelings, ideas, and information among group members in egalitarian relations.

Western concepts of self-help groups emphasize direct communication in face-to-face small groups. This emphasis is related to Judeo-Christian traditions, where group confession has been valued. Among Japanese people, spontaneous sharing has been done not only through direct communication in face-to-face small groups but also through indirect communication by exchanging writings in newsletters and so on.

Japanese culture has a sort of groupism, and it often puts more value on the welfare of groups than on the welfare of individuals in groups. In addition, the Japanese hierarchical structure of communication may obstruct egalitarian communication. Because of these hindering cultural factors, we should emphasize the importance of "wakachiai" (spontaneous sharing).

The second basic quality and process is "hitoridachi" (individual independence). It has two parts.

One is self-management. By participating in self-help groups, people learn how to manage their own lives by themselves.

Another is social participation. Even if they learn how to manage their own lives, they are not regarded as independent individuals as long as they are socially isolated, because human beings are social beings. Through self-help groups, people achieve social participation.

One of the obstructive factors in Japanese culture toward "hitoridachi" (individual independence) is the fact that Japanese hierarchical society promotes dependence on authorities. A proof is an extremely popular, long-time run TV program, "MITO KOMON," where an incognito top leader in the feudal age helps poor people, saying "let me solve your problem." It expresses an idea that dependence on authority is powerful. However, self-help groups require that people do not depend

(4)

on authorities but are motivated toward self-management.

Another obstructive cultural factor is a traditional Japanese sense of social status. In the long feudal age, people were taught to know their own social status. Stigmatized people may give up social participation, being influenced by such old ways of thinking.

The final quality and process is "tokihanachi" (emancipation from suppression). It also has two parts.

The one is emancipation from self-suppression. Stigmatized people often internalize the social discrimination against them, and their self-esteem is very low. Emancipation from self-suppression includes recovering self-esteem. By redefining problems, self-help groups help stigmatized people to recover self-esteem.

Another is emancipation from social suppression. It includes their social actions and objections.

One of the obstructive factors blocking against recovery of self-esteem is Japanese conformist society, which values everyone being the same. Being different is shameful in the conformist society. Members of self-help groups are often different from others in society. They may have difficulty in recovering self-esteem.

Another factor is Japanese groupism, which had historically worked as mutual-watching and mutual-restraint mechanisms. It may prevent people from developing social actions and objections.

In summary, if we describe the concept of self-help group in three simple pure Japanese words, "wakachiai," "hitoridachi," and "tokihanachi," it helps Japanese people to understand the concept of self-help groups, which originated in Western culture.

Lastly, I would like to express my appreciation for the support of Mrs. Shirley ST-John, the Institute of Cultural Affairs, who helped me to translate my paper into English.

Thank you for your attention.