

Research on the Difficulties of Women with a Mental Illness and the Role of Self-help Groups

Yuri GOTO^{1,2} · You TSUCHIYA³ · Naoko KAWAGUCHI²
 (¹ Fukuyama City University, ² Ritsumeikan University, ³ Aichi University)

【Previous Research on Self-help Groups】

1. A self-help group (SHG) has the role of forming experiential knowledge, which is different from professional knowledge (Borkman 1976)
2. Tojisha-kenkyu, or self-directed research, has been developed in some places in Japan. (e.g., Urakawa Bethel no Ie 2005)

【Research Questions】

1. What are the advantages and limitations of attending a SHG when it comes to the difficulties faced by women with a mental illness?
2. What can we suggest to SHG based on this research?

【Research Method】

- We conducted semi-structured interviews of 6 women with a mental illness in the central part of Japan. (May 2017 to March 2018).
- All interviewees had experience attending self-help groups for their illness.
- All narratives are categorized into 7 categories (Work, Pregnancy & Delivering Babies, Childrearing, the Field of Medicine, Friendship, Romantic Relationships & Marriage, Social Norms). We examined the narratives that belonged to the categories related to SHG.

【Narratives Related to Self-help Groups】

Category	Advantages	Limitations
Work	I had an obsession with getting a job. But a peer in the SHG told me that there are other ways to contribute to society. Thanks to this advice, I was able to get over my obsession. (A, Bipolar Depression, 30s)	I am dissatisfied with my self-help group because my peers always talk about work. (B, Depression, 60s). I cannot join the conversation when my peers are talking about employment (note: she is a housewife). (C, Depression, 50s)
Pregnancy & Delivering Babies	-	Nobody was pregnant or delivered a baby after they were diagnosed. I got little information. (A, Bipolar Depression, 30s)
Childrearing	-	I don't talk about childrearing in the SHG. (A, Bipolar Depression, 30s)
Field of Medicine	I can get medical information. (D, Bipolar Depression, 50s) I delivered my baby with the help of a doctor whom I met at a SHG event. (A, Bipolar Depression, 30s)	-
Friendship	I feel at home (C, Depression, 50s & E, Schizophrenia, 50s) I can open myself up. (B, Depression, 60s) I can share my experiences and find something in common with my peers. (D, Bipolar Depression, 50s)	It is difficult to talk with people who have different diagnoses. (D, Bipolar Depression, 50s)

【Analysis: The Role of SHGs】

- Self-help groups provide professional knowledge (medical knowledge), new perspectives and relationships.
- However, it is unlikely they can eliminate difficulties in all categories. Women with mental illnesses are not able to sufficiently acquire information and talk about their problems.
- One reason for this may be that women in Japan have multiple social norms they have to obey (e.g., earning money, being pregnant, delivering babies, raising children). Self-help groups are not responsive to diversity.

【Suggestions for SHGs】

- Promote diversity: collect and provide diverse 'experiential knowledge.'
e.g., promote attending SHGs to women with mental illnesses, conduct awareness campaigns for organizers of SHGs, etc.
- Focus on social barriers to find things in common (e.g., customs and ways of thinking, including norms concerning gender roles).

【Conclusion】

Drawing on the narratives we clarified the advantages and limitations of self-help groups for women with a mental illness. Self-help groups provide professional knowledge and spaces for forming relationships with peers who have the same disease. However, self-help groups provide little information and discuss a limited number of topics. Therefore, attendees' difficulties are not resolved. By collecting and providing knowledge on the diversity of women with a mental illness and focusing on the social barriers faced by people with a mental illness, self-help groups can become better places for resolving difficulties.

【References】 Borkman, T., 1976, Experiential Knowledge: A New Concept for the Analysis of Self-Help Groups. *Social Service Review*, 50, 445-456., Goto, Y. & Y. Tsuchiya, et al., 2017, 'Difficulties and Intersectionality experienced by women with disabilities, Poster Presentation, Nihon Shakai Gakkai, Urakawa Bethel no Ie, 2005, Self-directed Research in Bethel no Ie (Bethel no Ie no Tojisha Kenkyu), Igaku Shin.

This research has been approved by AICHI University's ethical committee (Jinrinsyo 2016-04). We have conducted it with consent from interviewees
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