

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT FOR TRAINING ABOUT SELF-HELP GROUPS: RATIONALE AND REALIZATIONS

RICHARD WOLLERT, PH.D.
Richard Wollert and Associates, Portland, Oregon

ABSTRACT

North American self-help groups have flourished remarkably over the last twenty years (Katz, 1981) so that they now serve a huge number of persons and address a broad range of problems in living. My own observations of the development of university curricula over this period, however, led me to believe that educational resources about self-help groups have not kept pace with this expansion. Should this imbalance be corrected? I believe that a compelling rationale may be formulated for studying self-help groups. How should self-help training proceed? There are a number of options that might be explored. The following sections serve to elaborate these points, and suggest several actions that might be taken to improve the curricula about self-help groups that are offered under university auspices.

A RATIONALE FOR STUDYING SELF-HELP GROUPS

There are several different reasons that might be cited for studying self-help groups, depending on who or what is perceived as the primary beneficiary of the training that is undertaken. Three particularly noteworthy relationships between the context, focus, and beneficiary of training are presented in Figure 1. As line (A) suggests, professionals who receive self-help training may be expected to provide services to the groups. The chances of this would increase, for example, with the development of professional skills for consulting on such issues as group initiation, organizational satisfaction, and the establishment of sponsorship and outreach programs. Training would also make professionals more aware of the general skills they possess that are of value to self-help groups, such as conceptual abilities for summarizing a group's implicit ideology or inter-

Training Context		Training Focus		Training Beneficiary
(A) Self-Help Group	⊗	Professional Service Provider	⊗	Other Self-Help Groups
(B) Self-Help Group	⊗	Professional Service Provider	⊗	Professional Service Provider
			⊗	Future Clients of the Service Provider
(C) Self-Help Group	⊗	Professional Service Providers and Planners at all Levels	⊗	Human Services Delivery System

Figure 1. Alternative benefits that flow from self-help training.

personal abilities for resolving conflicts between members. The extensive literature on the contributions of professionals to self-help groups (Gartner & Riessman, 1980; Toseland & Hacker, 1982; Wollert & Barron, 1983) underscores the virtually unlimited service opportunities that may be realized.

Whenever the benefits of self-help involvement are considered, they are usually assumed to flow from a professional provider to a nonprofessional organization. This is an unfortunate assumption because training in self-help groups may actually increase the competence of professionals and broaden their understanding of human behavior, as portrayed in (B). For example, the accumulation of clinical knowledge about a specific concern, such as living with a compulsive gambler, may be limited for many professionals in training because they may be exposed to only a few relevant cases. In addition, the theoretical and applied aspects of their training may bias them toward attributing their clients' ineffective or extreme reactions to unique personality factors and to view insight-oriented psychotherapy as the "royal road" of personal change. Self-help training may, against this backdrop, contribute to professional development by providing access to many persons facing the same issue and seeking to help one another through naturalistic processes that have their basis in everyday life. The comparative evaluations that this enables may contribute substantially to the construction of an effective clinical framework. Valuable research hypotheses may be formulated as a result of contrasting accepted clinical formulations with the reported experiences of group members. By observing the interactions of members, an appreciation of the importance of supportive concepts, such as hope and

encouragement, for personal change may be obtained. By keeping in mind the similarities in the stories of members, a new perspective may be gained on the extent to which human reactions are normal rather than unique, and determined by the intersection of cultural values and critical life experiences rather than personality disorder.

Self-help training may not only have immediate benefits, but may also impact on the structure of our future human services delivery systems, a possibility that is suggested by path (C). Numerous factors have contributed to the success of these groups (Wollert & Barron, 1983), including pressures for the creation of additional human services resources, traditional and emergent ideals, and the enthusiasm and confidence held by a great many people for what has been termed the "self-help movement" (Katz, 1981). Furthermore, the operation of these factors is likely to be as evident in the foreseeable future as has been the case in the past. The position of self-help groups within our culture will therefore be consolidated as we approach and move into the next century.

This development represents a unique opportunity for elaborating the human services delivery system. Careful planning and a sensitive coordination of efforts will be necessary, however, to realize this opportunity. This, in turn, will depend in large part on how knowledgeable planners and providers at all levels are with respect to the strengths, limitations, and organizational dimensions of self-help groups. The training that human services professionals receive about self-help groups may thus be a key element in determining how constructive and far-reaching an alliance may be realized between the formal helping system and self-help groups (Wollert, 1990).

REALIZATIONS FOR PROVIDING TRAINING ABOUT SELF-HELP GROUPS

Overall, it is apparent that strong arguments in favor of increasing the resources available for self-help training may be made on a number of bases. If these are taken to heart by those who are responsible for training programs, there should be few implementation problems in that a variety of university-based training options are possible, depending on the needs of trainees. I would like to describe a few of these alternatives, illustrating these descriptions with examples drawn from my experience as an academician involved in graduate and undergraduate education.

For advanced undergraduates and graduate students, the traditional academic course probably represents the vehicle which would be most widely used for learning about self-help groups. Some of the components of a half-year course are presented in Table 1. The didactic core of this course would consist of readings and lectures on self-help definitions and typologies, the history of

Table 1. Components of a Half-Year Course on Self-Help Groups

-
- I. Core Lecture Topics and Examples of Assigned Readings
 - A. Definitions and Typologies (Killilea, 1976; Katz, 1981)
 - B. History of Mutual Assistance (Hurvitz, 1976)
 - C. Naturalistic Helping Processes (Antze, 1976; Riessman, 1965; Wollert, Levy, & Knight, 1982)
 - D. Professional Involvement (Toseland & Hacker, 1982)
 - E. Self-Help Clearinghouses (Borck & Aronowitz, 1982; Wollert, 1990)
 - F. Research Issues (Levy, 1984; Lieberman & Bond, 1979)

 - II. Supplementary Lecture Topics
 - A. Comparisons with Professional Systems
 - B. Dimensions of Heterogeneity Among Self-Help Groups
 - C. Natural Histories of Selected Groups
 - D. Organizational Procedures

 - III. Scholarly Projects
 - A. Group observation and comparative analysis
 - B. Essay on a topic of current importance (e.g., social policy, rural self-help, cultural differences)
 - C. Empirical research
 - D. Technological or methodological recommendations

 - IV. Other Training Experiences
 - A. Audio-visual presentations (McKay, 1984; Savreau & Moreau, 1984)
 - B. Field trips to open meetings
 - C. Oral reports of progress on class projects
 - D. In-class presentations by members of different types of groups
-

the self-help movement, naturalistic helping processes, professional involvement, the advent of self-help clearinghouses, and research issues. Although a few examples of readings that address these topics are included in Table 1, appropriate reference materials may also be identified by reviewing currently available texts (Borman et al., 1982; Gartner & Riessman, 1977; Gartner & Riessman, 1984; Katz & Bender, 1976; Lieberman & Borman, 1979; Pancoast, Parker, & Froland, 1983; Romeder, 1982) or by consulting an annotated bibliography of relevant articles (Todres, 1983). Supplemental lectures could be developed on topics of particular interest to the instructor, such as comparisons with professional systems, heterogeneity among groups, and the natural histories of different self-help programs. Audio-visual materials, field trips to open meetings, and in-class presentations by speakers from various types of groups would

be useful in bringing the didactic material to life. Completion of a scholarly paper by the students, preceded by an oral presentation and critique of its proposed contents, would round out the requirements of the course.

I have twice presented a course along these lines to classes composed of about fifteen students. Students showed their interest in the lectures by numerous comments and questions, and responded enthusiastically to the presentations of self-help group members. They also appeared to be engaged in completing their class projects and field experiences, probably because they had the opportunity to select topics and groups for observation that were personally relevant. Most students elected to carry out an intensive analysis of one group or a comparative analysis of at least two groups as their project. A broad range of groups was studied by the classes, however, including groups with such focal concerns as Alzheimer's disease, anorexia, lupus erythematosus, tinnitus, alcoholism, spouse abuse, single parenting, women's issues, bisexuality, heart disease, overeating, affective disorders, and coping with the death of a child. For many students, one of the great values of the course was its experiential component: as a result of their own observations and listening to those of their classmates, they obtained an empirically-grounded understanding of such abstract concepts as "adjustment issue," "problem in living," "support," and "natural helper." These observations substantiate the conclusion that, while components of the course I have outlined may be valuable additions to other courses, a viable course may be offered that is specifically focused on self-help groups.

For students who wish to pursue their self-help interests beyond this point, it may be possible to arrange practica placements for them with self-help groups or community agencies that provide significant support to self-help groups. Some caution must be exercised, of course, in developing practica so that faculty sponsors are assured their students will receive meaningful training tasks and supervision when they are placed at off-campus sites. Within these guidelines, however, practica experiences can be very instructive.

As one example of practica training, over a three-year period I arranged placements for many undergraduates with an information and referral center that I was collaborating with to develop a self-help information service (Wollert, 1984). Supervision of these students was carried out in part by the *I&R* staff and in part by my own staff. Trainees identified self-help groups in the local community, contacted group members to obtain information for a resource file, received training in information and referral procedures, disseminated information about self-help groups to community residents contacting the *I&R* for this purpose, and took part in a public relations campaign to increase the utilization of the self-help information service. From my perspective, the contributions of the trainees to the completion of the project were substantial. From the responses

trainees gave to a questionnaire evaluating the service, it was evident that they viewed their practica experience in a similarly positive light.

It would obviously be appropriate to encourage graduate students holding specific interests in natural helping and community interventions to focus their theses work on self-help groups. A great number of theses studying self-help issues have not been completed, but a range of topics is possible. In one case, two students in social work conducted a formative evaluation of the self-help information service mentioned above, in the process contacting staff members, self-help groups, community residents, and the directors of other clearinghouses (Tuma & Wadsworth, 1981). In another, a student in psychology evaluated the psychometric properties of an instrument for assessing the helping processes that occur in self-help groups, basing her conclusions on a sample of 150 members drawn from twelve groups (Eakins, 1983). These illustrations point to the conclusion that viable theses may be developed out of self-help research, and that acceptable projects may be of either an applied or basic nature.

In the foregoing examples, the relevance of self-help groups as a research context was directly suggested by the central topics of the theses. It may also be asserted that self-help groups provide a valuable setting for "integrative research" (Gottlieb, 1983) in cases where students hold general theoretical interests that do not directly suggest the study of self-help groups. Attitude change, attributions, leadership style, and cohesion are but a few examples of psychological topics that do not require the study of self-help groups, but might nevertheless be studied readily within such a context. Needless to say, threats to the validity of this type of research, such as selection biases, must be considered in developing specific projects. However, the assets of self-help members should also be factored into this type of validity assessment, particularly their experience with introspection and self-disclosure about problems that are urgent and personally important. At the very least, tapping this base of experience would do much to extend the validity of findings obtained from laboratory analogue populations of college students. More likely, it would generate provocative findings for extensions to other populations. Therefore, if thesis advisors and their students seriously evaluate the research potential of self-help groups in the future, my guess is that the advantages of studying them will often be found to outweigh their disadvantages.

This assertion, like my previous assertions, may be illustrated by way of personal experience. A psychology graduate student and I evaluated a personal change intervention for developing communications skills by administering it within a self-help group for incestuous families (Wollert, 1988). Although we could have used college students to assess this package, our intervention was

particularly relevant to this group because of the serious disruptions in interpersonal communications that are found in incestuous families (Giarretto, 1978). We randomly assigned interested self-help members to either our experimental group, which met at the same time as the self-help group for eight weeks, or a waiting-list control group, which continued to attend chapter meetings. At the end of our intervention, the experimental participants reported significantly greater satisfaction with their communications skills than control participants. These results were heartening, of course. What impressed us, however, was that they were obtained in a setting where the comparison group seemingly controlled for many potent "attention/placebo" factors. Working with a self-help group was highly advantageous in this instance in that it was one of the few research contexts that facilitated that development of strong controls with a minimum expenditure of resources.

CONCLUSIONS

Proceeding from the assumption that limitations exist in the self-help training programs offered under university auspices, this article has presented a rationale for formulating such programs and suggested possible avenues of training. I have focused on university programs, not out of a proprietary interest but because I believe that incorporation of a body of knowledge into university curricula lends it credibility, provides for the establishment of ongoing training efforts, and increases the dissemination of content throughout relevant professional fields. These advantages suggest that those of us who believe that promoting the growth of the self-help field is a worthwhile goal should do what we can to encourage institutions of higher education in this direction. This presents something of a problem, because of the insular nature of universities. It does seem, however, that several options are appropriate and plausible. First, those of us who are academicians might develop courses about self-help groups and direct the attention of our students toward these groups as I have suggested above. Second, those who are involved in self-help groups and community-based organizations working with self-help groups might establish collaborative working relationships with university researchers and practica advisors. Third, those who are government administrators might support demonstration projects and workshops on self-help groups that entail university involvement or sponsorship.

How adequately we exercise these options depends in part on the depth of our conviction that it is possible to develop curricula in the self-help area that are consistent with university settings. My purpose in generously illustrating this article with case examples was to underscore how realistic this possibility is. From

my perspective, a curriculum is successfully initiated when scholars act “as if” they have identified an important phenomenon, teach “as if” they are knowledgeable about the dimensions of this phenomenon, and conduct research “as if” they have the abilities and procedures to study the phenomenon. Consolidation of curricula is realized when this tentative stance is validated through the feedback of actual experience. By offering the above realizations I hope that I have succeeded in raising the expectation that this transition may be successfully completed for the field of self-help.

REFERENCES

- Antze, P. (1976). The role of ideologies in peer psychotherapy organizations: Some theoretical considerations and three case studies. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 12 (3), 323-346.
- Borck, L. E., & Aronowitz, E. (1982). The role of the self-help clearinghouse. In L. D. Borman, L. E. Borck, R. Hess, & F. L. Pasquale (Eds.), *Helping people to help themselves: Self-help and prevention* (pp. 121-129). New York: Haworth Press.
- Borman, L. D., Borck, L. E., Hess, R., & Pasquale, F. L. (Eds.) (1982). *Helping people to help themselves: Self-help and prevention*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Eakins, L. (1983). *Psychometric properties of the group process questionnaire*. Unpublished master's thesis, Portland State University, Portland, OR.
- Gartner, A. & Riessman, F. (1977). *Self-help in the human services*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gartner, A., & Riessman, F. (1980). *Help: A working guide to self-help groups*. New York: New Viewpoints.
- Gartner, A., & Riessman, F. (Eds.) (1984). *The self-help revolution*. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- Giarretto, H. (1978). Coordinated community treatment of incest. In A. W. Burgess, A. N. Groth, L. L. Homstrom, & S. M. Sroi (Eds.), *Sexual assault of children and adolescents*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Gottlieb, B. H. (1983). Social support as a focus for integrative research in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 38 (3), 278-287.
- Hurvitz, N. (1976). The origin of the peer self-help psychotherapy group movement. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 12 (3), 283-294.
- Katz, A. H. (1981). Self-help and mutual aid: An emerging social movement? *Annual Review of Sociology*, 15, 51-60.
- Katz, A. H., & Bender, E. I. (Eds.) (1976). *The strength in us: Self-help groups in the modern world*. New York: New Viewpoints.
- Killilea, M. (1976). Mutual help organizations: Interpretations in the literature. In G. Caplan and M. Killilea (Eds.), *Support systems and mutual help: Multidisciplinary explorations* (pp. 37-94). New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Levy, L. H. (1984). Issues in research and evaluation. In A. Gartner & F. Riessman (Eds.), *The self-help revolution*. New York: Human Sciences Press.

- Lieberman, M. A., & Bond, G. R. (1979). Problems in studying outcomes. In M. A. Lieberman, L. D. Borman, & Associates (Eds.), *Self-help groups for coping with crisis: Origins, members, processes, and impact* (pp. 323-340). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lieberman, M. A., Borman, L. D., & Associates (1979). *Self-help groups for coping with crisis: Origins, members, processes, and impact*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McKay, K. (producer, director) (1984). *We've been there* Film. Toronto: T.V. Ontario.
- Riessman, F. (1965). The 'helper-therapy' principle. *Social Work, 10*, 27-32.
- Romedor, J. M. (1982). *Self-help groups in Canada*. Ottawa: Program Information Unit, Health and Welfare Canada.
- Savreau, R., & Moreau, M. (producer, director) (1984). *Les coulisses de l'entraide* Film. Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada.
- Todres, R. (1983). *Self-help groups: An annotated bibliography 1970-1982*. New York: National Self-Help Clearinghouse.
- Toseland, R. W., & Hacker, F. (1982). Self-help groups and professional involvement. *Social Work, 27*, 341-347.
- Tuma, C., & Wadsworth, J. H. (1981). *A description and evaluation of the Self-Help Information and Referral Service*. Unpublished master's thesis, Portland State University, Portland, OR.
- Pancoast, D. L., Parker, P., & Froland, C. (Eds.) (1983). *Rediscovering self-help: Its role in social care*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Wollert, R. (1988). An evaluation of a communications training program within a group of sexually abusive families. *Community Mental Health Journal, 24*, 229-235.
- Wollert, R. (1990). Self-help clearinghouse: An overview of an emergent system of human services for promoting mutual aid. In T. Powell (Ed.), *Working with self-help groups* (pp. 254-256). Chicago: Dorsey Press.
- Wollert, R. W. (1984, August). *An information and referral model for improving self-help group utilization*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada.
- Wollert, R. W., & Barron, N. (1983). Avenues of collaboration. In D. L. Pancoast, P. Parker, & C. Froland (Eds.), *Rediscovering self-help: Its role in social care* (pp. 105-123). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Wollert, R. W., Levy, L. H., & Knight, B. G. (1982). Help-giving in behavioral control and stress coping self-help groups. *Small Group Behavior, 13* (2), 204-218.

Direct reprint requests to

Richard Wollert
 Richard Wollert and Associates
 1220 SW Morrison, Ste. 929
 Portland, OR 97205