

Research Articles

**RESEARCH ON SELF-HELP ORGANIZATIONS
IN JAPAN: WORKING WITH A SENSE OF
DUTY (“GIRI”)***

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ABSTRACT

In any field research, the principle of reciprocity between researchers and research participants is crucial, and in specific cross-cultural contexts, it is managed differently. The purpose of this article is to explore the complexities involved in sustaining reciprocity during research involving self-help organizations in Japan. The Japanese cultural norm, “*giri*” (obligation), is explored through the analysis of three case studies: one describing a successful entry into the field while avoiding any loss of face by the research participants; a second describing the different levels of information collected through long-term research; and the third describing a failure in maintaining the reciprocity by wrongly extending *giri*-relationships. The implications of *giri* for field research on Japanese self-help organizations are also discussed.

Key Words: methodology, Japanese social research, alcoholism, mental illness

Developing rapport with research participants is crucial for all fieldwork researchers (Sherif, 2001; Vallaster, 2000). However, for researchers working

*This research was partly supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) #19530513. A paper based on the research was presented at the 2008 conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR).

with self-help organizations, much more careful attention has to be given for maintaining trust-based relationships with research participants. This is because the meetings of self-help organizations, which are often exclusive to their members, are organized on the premise that only those who have had the same experiences are able to comprehend their special circumstances. As Gidron, Chesler, and Chesney (1991) state: "The informal nature of these grass-roots organizations often makes them wary of strangers, and especially of people 'outside' the community of fellow sufferers" (p. 671). In many cases, the members of self-help groups do not expect researchers, as outsiders, to be able to understand their organization, as they have not directly experienced their problems.

The aim of this article is to illustrate difficulties faced by a Japanese (Oka) and an Australian (Chenhall) social scientist when we tried to maintain trust with leaders of self-help groups in order to conduct research in their organization. In this article, we firstly review how researchers have described these difficulties. Secondly, we focus on a Japanese cultural code, "*giri*." *Giri* means a sense of duty or reciprocity, and it is important in defining the relationships between researchers and their participants in self-help group research in Japan. Thirdly, we give three case illustrations on the basis of our own experience of research with self-help groups in Japan, and we discuss their implications in the conclusion.

INITIAL DIFFICULTIES IN BUILDING TRUST

Although there is substantial literature on self-help groups, there are very few articles that document the relevant issues related to establishing research projects and building rapport. For example, Levy (1984), Lieberman and Borman (1976), Powell (1994), and Vincent (1989) discuss various issues related to research on self-help groups, but very little on how they established and carried out their research projects with the participants of self-help groups, including building rapport. Obtaining trust with research participants is a crucial part in improving the validity of data (Herbert, 2001) and the reflexivity of researchers has been an important part in the development of various social science disciplines (Sherif, 2001). However, the three pioneer books based on fieldwork with self-help groups (Drakeford, 1969; Katz, 1961; Sagarin, 1969) do not make explicit how they built their relationships through their field research. More recently, Stein and Mankowski (2004) have discussed various issues related to qualitative research on self-help groups, yet they mentioned little about how they negotiated the research contract and reflected on their own experiences in conducting research on self-help groups.

Chesler (1991) is one of few who has discussed difficulties in researching self-help groups. He states:

Since many self-help groups develop explicitly to fill gaps or create change in the service delivery system, they are not likely to trust establishment-based

researchers, even applied or action researchers, and especially not researchers embedded in the professional bureaucracy delivering services people feel are inadequate. (p. 765)

He added, “This is undoubtedly one explanation for the [self-help groups’] resistance to research” (p. 765).

Chesler (1990) notes that his research with self-help groups was aided by his own personal involvement in support groups. In his studies of self-help groups for parents of children with cancer, he states that he was helped by his role “as a parent of a child with cancer and an organizer of support groups” (p. 275). There is a large body of research concerning the role of researchers as insiders to specific groups, either by membership or ethnic/identity affiliation (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Karim, 1993; Messerschmidt, 1981; Rabinow, 1977; Ritchie, Blignaut, Bunde-Birouste, & Silove, 2009; Rosaldo, 1989). Sherif (2001) explains that researchers as “partial insiders” have raised questions about the boundaries of understanding and interpretation. While an insider might reveal understandings based on reflexive and subjective knowledge that could take an outsider some time to gain, it could also be argued that only an outsider researcher can develop a truly interpretative and objective authority. Sherif (2001) notes that “‘partial insiders’ are also constrained in their research and analyses both by boundaries imposed through the anthropological discipline and by personal, gendered experiences in the field” (p. 438). There are also important ethical issues related to the information gained from participation in self-help groups as an insider. For example, how do a researcher’s peers clearly differentiate their discussions as peer support from a research interview, which can be later documented and published?

Participatory action research (PAR) is one approach that has been successfully utilized by self-help researchers, including Borkman and Schubert (1994), Chesler (1990, 1991), Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, and Lord (1998), and Oka (2003). Wadsworth (1998) describes PAR as follows:

Essentially Participatory Action Research (PAR) is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it. . . . Participatory action research is not just research, which is hoped that will be followed by action. It is action, which is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by participants. Nor is it simply an exotic variant of consultation. Instead, it aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped. Nor can it be used by one group of people to get another group of people to do what is thought best for them—whether that is to implement a central policy or an organisational or service change. Instead it tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry.

In the case of self-help groups, a PAR approach allows both the researchers and self-help group members to collaboratively work toward a shared goal, whether to understand the experience of self-help groups in meetings or to assess the outcomes related to self-help group membership.

An essential part of a PAR approach to the study of self-help groups is that the relationship between the research and the participant involves reciprocity. Both parties have expectations about both their inputs and outputs related to a project. While the benefits of research might be imagined differently by the two parties involved (Bailey, 1996), this is predicated on the development of a relationship between both parties. And this relationship is affected by the cultural norms associated with reciprocity. In the case of Japan, we would like to propose that the concept of “*giri*” is important in understanding the idea of reciprocity in research.

GIRI: SOCIAL OBLIGATION

Giri is one of the most useful cultural terms for understanding Japanese social norms of reciprocal moral exchange (Befu, 1968; Davies & Ikeno, 2002; Lebra, 1976). Although “there is no possible English equivalent” (Benedict, 1954, p. 133), *giri* may be defined as follows:

A norm that obliges the observance of reciprocal relation—to help those who have helped one, to do favors for those from whom one has received favors, and so forth. The concept implies a moral force that compels members of society to engage in socially expected reciprocal activities even when their natural inclination (*ninjō*) may be to do otherwise. To feudal warriors, *giri* referred foremost to their obligation to serve their lord, even at the cost of their lives, and to repay *ON* (favor) received from the lord. In Japan, to be observant of *giri* is [still] an indication of high moral worth. To neglect the obligation to reciprocate is to lose the trust of others expecting reciprocation and eventually to lose their support. (*Giri and ninjō*, 1993, p. 457)

While a sense of obligation related to reciprocity seems to have been prevalent among many different peoples throughout history, the Japanese sense of social obligation known as *giri* contains a distinctive feature when paired with *ninjō* (personal feelings). For the Japanese, “every human connection is some variation of *giri-ninjō* and no one can escape from its shadow. A mother’s acts of affection to her child and one’s deeds of generosity for a close friend are all spontaneous and pure,” the source of which is *ninjō*, whereas “what a man does for his colleague or superior is a matter of *giri*” (Ozaki, 1978, p. 185). This implies that doing something from a sense of *giri* can be perfunctory and superficial.

The pair of words *giri-ninjō* can be best understood if we consider other related pairs of Japanese terms such as “*tatemae* and *honne*,” “*omote* and *ura*,” and “*soto*, and *uchi*” (Bachnik, 1992). Bachnik (1989) points out the following:

The Japanese have been characterized as having two modes of social life: one involving discipline and distance; the other involving spontaneity and intimacy The two modes are commonly expressed in the Japanese language as paired sets of terms which include *omote* “in-front, appearance” versus *ura* “in-back, what is kept hidden from others” . . . ; *soto* “outside” versus *uchi* “the world of personal feelings” . . . ; *tatemae* “the surface reality” versus *honne* “the world of the inner feelings” Two sets of polar meanings are apparent in these terms: first, a series of directional coordinates (“inside” and “outside,” “in-front” and “in-back”); second, a series of meanings of specifying self and society. The meanings for self include: personal feelings (*ninjō*), inner feelings (*honne*); [*sic*] what is hidden from others (*ura*); while meanings for society include: social obligations (*giri*), the surface reality (*tatemae*), and appearance (*omote*). (p. 239)

While there is very little methodological discussion about the effects of “*giri*” on social research in Japan, we would argue that it is part of a broader cultural framework which may limit the kind of information social researchers are able to obtain from Japanese self-help organizations.

An example of *giri* relationships can be provided through the following hypothetical situation. A University professor might introduce a group of researchers to a self-help organization with whom she has a *giri* relationship. The leader unwillingly agrees to meet with the researchers because of the leader’s *giri* obligation to the professor. If the leader declines the professor’s request, the professor will lose face (Mitsubishi, 1988, p. 71). This would negatively affect her relationship with the group leader. The leader therefore responds according to *tatemae*, “principles or official stance” (Mitsubishi, 1988, p. 51), and states that the group would be very happy to take part in the research project. The members would also readily agree to be interviewed because of their *giri* to the leader. They would also respond according to *tatemae* and show the new researchers their organization’s “surface” (*omote*). The researchers would only gain a viewpoint from the “outside” (*soto*), and so the leader and the members would have no need to reveal their “true feelings” (*honne*), to let the researchers enter the “inside” (*uchi*), or to show them the depths (*ura*) of their organization.

The emphasis on maintaining specific types of relationships based on insider/outsider status is not necessarily unique to Japan (see for example Ritchie et al., 2009), however the specific cultural context in Japan is unique. As Davies and Ikeno (2002) state:

The Japanese do not like to express themselves in a straightforward manner for fear that it might hurt other’s feelings, so they are usually careful about what they say and often use *tatemae* in order to get along well with others. . . . In Japan, there has been, since ancient times, a great respect for harmony *Tatemae* is used to maintain this harmony and create a comfortable atmosphere. Thus, *honne* is used in one’s personal space, but *tatemae* is used in more public forums such as business meetings. (p. 116)

Many self-help group leaders consider an interview that involves a researcher to be a public event. Therefore, they generally regard responding with *tatemae* as more polite and formal. As Graham and Sano (1984) note from a non-Japanese point of view, “this distinction between *tatemae* and *honne* seems hypocritical. However, the discrepancy is borne by the Japanese in good conscience” (p. 24).

Whether or not they are naïve about the Japanese sense of *giri*, once Japanese researchers start to conduct research on self-help organizations, they cannot escape *giri*. Researchers often feel a certain social pressure to become involved with an organization for an extended period and to represent themselves publicly as their supporters. Hence, it would be undesirable for them to show any commitment to other potentially rival organizations. For example, Oka had been doing long-term research with one of the major self-help groups for patients with a disease in Japan. When a separate patients’ self-help organization invited him to become a member of their board, Oka declined, due to his sense of *giri* to the group he was also already researching. While multi-site collaborative research is becoming increasingly popular in the health sciences in Australia and New Zealand due to a variety of reasons, including the increased likelihood of gaining funding, attracting a greater diversity of practice settings and clients, improving the generalizability of results, and improving access to resources, various difficulties have been cited. For example, McCloughen and O’Brien (2006) cite problems associated with communication, environmental factors, politics and power relations, and organizational culture. We would also add that the very culture of collaborative research itself in different countries plays an important part in the acceptability of multi-sited research.

The ambiguity of *giri* might also cause some problems for researchers. As Smith (1983) points out, “The person to whom the obligation is owed has no right to demand that it be repaid; that is, such a person may specify neither the timing of the repayment nor its amount” (p. 45). This ambiguity about repayment means that researchers may feel indebted to research participants for an unlimited period. As mentioned earlier, the issue of *giri* is unavoidable for all field researchers in Japan. While *giri* might force research participants to be very cooperative, their cooperation may well be very superficial and, as a result, the findings of the research could be equally shallow. Even if the research is successful, the ambiguity of the *giri* relationship with research participants might cause complications that are long lasting.

CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

To clarify the methodological issues of Japanese field research with self-help organizations, we will now outline three cases where *giri* was an essential determinant of how the research proceeded. We have altered some unimportant details in order to conceal the identity of the people involved.

Case 1 involves the interaction between a foreign researcher to Japan (Chenhall), and two Japanese researchers (Oka and Dr. A), who lived in different regions, but had conducted research on the same self-help group. Due to the Japanese researchers' sense of *giri* to their different contacts within the self-help group, organizing an interview schedule for Chenhall was difficult and could only be achieved when Oka ceased to be involved in the process.

Case 2 shows how Oka and Chenhall developed trusted relationships with leaders and members of a self-help group. While links were first made through *giri* relationships, it took significant time and effort over a number of years before members shared their *honme* (inner feelings) with Oka and Chenhall.

In Case 3, Oka recalls an incident where *giri* obligations were not satisfactorily performed by a graduate student while researching a mental health self-help group. When members of the organization provided the researcher with several chances to repay his obligation, the researcher unintentionally rejected their offers and caused offence. Subsequently the leaders of the organization terminated the research and prohibited the researcher from utilizing the data. They used what has been called their "veto power" related to decisions about the continuation of research (Powell, 1994).

In these three cases, research projects were pursued at a Japanese university, which had not established any formal procedures for researchers for the protection of human subjects. Formal human research ethics committees are still a new concept in Japan (Macfarlane & Saitoh, 2008).

Case 1: Keeping the *Giri* Norm

The first contact person is always a crucial issue for researchers who are about to start field research on self-help groups in Japan. If the wrong person is selected, the research may well fail. This is because the first contact person can control the entire development of the research through *giri*. As McLaughlin (2010) states, when doing fieldwork in Japan:

It is important to remember that, if you are contacting an individual in Japan, that person is definitely linked to a network of other people. . . . Treat every introduction to an individual as an introduction to a large organization that has the potential to affect your research as a whole. In other words, assume that the first impression you make on any one person will be reported to a network of people.

Researchers could feel so indebted to their first contact person that they cannot do anything without his or her permission, particularly if that person likes to dominate others. Field researchers have to depend on these first contacts who become gatekeepers of the research project. The dependent relationship can easily change into a hierarchical one, whereby the researcher has very little influence or agency in directing the research. Without the permission of the gatekeeper, other group leaders and members might hesitate to talk with the researchers.

Moreover, researchers are considered to be part of the gatekeeper's "personal connection" (*jin-myaku*), which is seen by the Japanese people as an "asset" "because human relationships are of paramount importance in Japanese society" (Mitsubishi, 1988, p. 59). Once Oka attended a meeting of a branch of a self-help organization (Branch A). The leader of another branch of the same organization (Branch B) asked the leader of Branch A if they could also invite him to their meeting, because they saw him as belonging to Branch A and, therefore, as a part of their leader's *jin-myaku*. If Branch B had invited him without Branch A's permission, they would have suffered the disgrace of "stealing" *jin-myaku*. A further example of this can be seen in a previous incident experienced by Oka. At a party sponsored by a Japanese non-profit organization, Oka asked an American social worker to help him with his written English. Later, the president of the organization criticized Oka for using "their" people without permission, even though there was no employment contract between them. The American social worker was working for an American organization as a volunteer, and the American organization and the Japanese non-profit organization would occasionally organize tours for volunteers. However, the president of the Japanese organization saw their relationship with the Americans as an important asset. Oka's request of the American visitor was considered to be "stealing their asset."

Chenhall arrived to Japan in 2006 funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Postdoctoral (JSPS) Fellowship Scheme, the aim of which is to link postdoctoral students to Japanese "host" Professor for the conduct of collaborative research in Japan. Chenhall had conducted previous research into the ways indigenous groups in Australia had transformed Alcoholics Anonymous groups, integrating indigenous experiences and perspectives (Chenhall, 2007). He arrived in Japan with an interest to conduct research with Japan's largest self-help groups for alcoholics, the "Sobriety Alliance" (pseudonym) that had links to, but was presented in the literature, as quite separate from Alcoholics Anonymous. Oka was a leading expert in the field of Japanese self-help groups, having published in English a number of articles and books on the subject (see for example, Oka, 1994). When Chenhall first arrived in Japan, Oka was unsure how to make contact with the Sobriety Alliance, because he did not know who was the appropriate contact person he should select. For Chenhall this was viewed as a fairly straightforward process. In Australia, Chenhall would make contact with a head office of a self-help organization, perhaps speaking to leaders and program managers about an intended project. This would be undertaken early in project design, so that the organization could contribute their knowledge and experience to the project's development. The process might be formalized through a grant application involving both parties as equal partners in the research or a negotiated research agreement. In the case of the Japanese project, the Sobriety Alliance's website provided a contact telephone number, and Chenhall wondered why Oka did not simply pick up the telephone and speak to the relevant individuals at the organization's head office. Why was it so difficult?

As a veteran researcher on self-help organizations, Oka had many concerns. Oka knew that the presidents of some organizations function in name only (Oka, 2003, p. 211). If they were to choose such a president as the first contact person, the research may not go smoothly. On the other hand, finding a replacement contact person could cause a loss of face (*kao*) for the first person they contacted. As mentioned earlier, this loss of face could make it impossible for them to proceed, because the person who felt disgraced by the researchers might decide to hinder the research. Moreover, changing the contact person is considered quite disgraceful because it displays a distinct lack of *giri*.

Another problem is that some self-help organizations have serious conflicts between their leaders. Particular leaders want to accept the support of outsiders, especially outsiders who have authority such as university professors, because they expect that the outsider's support will make them stronger in promoting their faction over others. Therefore, researchers should not feel all their problems are over, even when they are enthusiastically welcomed by some leaders, because these leaders might have an ulterior motive. They might want to use the research results to criticize their superiors or opponents. In a previous research project with self-help groups, some leaders "seemed to hope that by including as much scathing criticism [about the superiors] as possible in the research report, their [superiors] would either be overthrown or forced to resign" (Oka, 2003, p. 358). Even in such cases, changing the contact person is viewed as disgraceful in Japanese culture and should therefore be avoided if we are to establish ourselves as trustworthy researchers.

The situation with the Sobriety Alliance was further complicated because the organization has a reputation for cherishing traditional Japanese values like *giri-ninjō*. In fact, many leaders and members have alleged that their bonds are cemented by *giri-ninjō*. The organization's "Japanism" seems to have been strengthened by having an U.S.-born anonymous self-help group in Japan as their rival in the same field of addiction.

Chenhall was very much aware of the collaborative nature of the project and thus the necessity to follow appropriate procedure. Chenhall had experience working with Australian indigenous organizations, where there is often a strict protocol about the conduct of research, which is set out in specific national policy and human research ethics documents (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2010). While research relationships themselves can be an important part in defining the nature and focus of the process of research, established protocols and ethical processes are uniformly applied to steps necessary to establish a project. In the absence of such protocols in Japan, Chenhall as a foreigner was entirely dependent on Oka to successfully navigate this process. As Bestor, Steinhoff, and Bestor (2003) note in their edited volume documenting foreign researchers' experiences in *Doing Fieldwork in Japan*:

The researcher must understand that his or her behaviour in the research situation not only affects the relationship between researcher and research subjects, but also reflects directly on the person who made the introduction. The person providing an introduction is—in a very real cultural sense—accepting a role as social guarantor. (p. 14)

Chenhall was reminded of his reliance on Oka for guidance on appropriate presentation and behavior on a number of occasions. In one of the first Sobriety Alliance meetings attended by Oka and Chenhall, they were asked to sit by the leaders of this meeting in a specific position in the room reserved for visitors. Oka had already instructed Chenhall that he should, as a guest of the Sobriety Alliance, wear a suit to meetings and events, a practice Chenhall had not quite expected. Wearing a suit to conduct fieldwork was unusual for Chenhall who was more akin to dressing informally during research endeavors. Feeling nervous at his first Sobriety Alliance meeting, Chenhall somewhat unconsciously tried to look relaxed and involuntarily crossed his legs. Oka had to instruct Chenhall, whispering into his ear during the meeting, to sit with his legs uncrossed as his informal posture could be interpreted as not giving due respect to the members and their organization.

In terms of establishing the project itself, the process of establishing their first research contacts involved significant deliberations concerning Oka's existing *giri* relationships with Sobriety Alliance leaders. After contemplating for a long time, Oka devised a solution. He telephoned a leader of a local group of Sobriety Alliance, whom he met once 13 years earlier. Sobriety Alliance consists of a federation of groups according to the typology of Schubert and Borkman (1991), in that they are "associated with superordinate levels of their own self-help organisation" at the national level, and "the local unit retain[s] full control of its decisions and functions" (p. 780). Because the leader Oka telephoned lived a long way from where he lives, their paths had not crossed since the first meeting. Surprisingly, after a very short greeting, he recognized Oka and he recommended as their first contact a leader whose local group was near to Oka's University office. He also promised that he would talk to this contact about Oka, meaning he would conduct a process of *nemawashi*. *Nemawashi* is a "semi-formal but systematic and sequential building procedure in Japan by which the approval of a proposed idea or project is sought from every person in a significant organizational position" (Fetters, 1995, p. 375). This process is usually time-consuming, but in this case, the leader that Oka talked to over the phone was going to act on his behalf.

In the meantime, Chenhall had been exchanging e-mails with Dr. A before his arrival in Japan. It is common in Australia for a researcher (especially during their postdoctoral phase of research) to establish a network of colleagues working in the same field, with the intent of sharing information, contacts, and ideas. Dr. A had been conducting PhD research on Sobriety Alliance, and had established a trusted relationship with a different local group. Dr. A. invited Chenhall to

visit their area and to meet with various leaders and attend a local Sobriety Alliance meeting. Dr. A also helped find a leader of that group (Mr. B) with whom Chenhall could conduct an interview. Because Dr. A knew that Chenhall was working with Oka, he telephoned Oka and said, "Could you telephone Mr. B? He is waiting for your call." This put Oka in a difficult situation due to a previous *giri* relationship between Oka and a leader from the same region, a Mr. C. Oka explained that he could not telephone Mr. B immediately, because he would have to first telephone Mr. C. Mr. C and Mr. B belonged to the same local group. Mr. C helped Oka in his research about self-help groups 13 years previously, creating a *giri* relationship. If Oka started to research this particular local group without consulting with Mr. C, who had been the top leader of the local group at the time of his previous research, Mr. C might feel that Oka had caused him to lose "face" (*kao*). Mr. B was much younger than Mr. C and passing over a veteran leader to consult with a younger one could offend the veteran leader. I explained this complicated situation to Dr. A and he said,

I understand your position very well. I also know that it is crucial to carefully choose the first contact person when undertaking research on self-help groups like Sobriety Alliance that cherish traditional Japanese values. However, in fact, Mr. B is waiting for your call.

He urged Oka to call Mr. B, implying that he would not telephone Mr. B on Oka's behalf. If he had to tell Mr. B that Oka was not yet ready to ask for his help, Mr. B would lose face, and the relationship between Dr. A and Mr. B would be put in jeopardy.

So now Oka felt that he was at an impasse and Chenhall, thinking that he was merely visiting a colleague and meeting Sobriety Alliance members and attending a meeting in a different region, was somewhat bewildered at these developments. Oka was unsure what to say to both Mr. C and Mr. B, both of whom would be prepared to act as gatekeepers for the research project. Unfortunately, Oka knew nothing about the relationship between Mr. B and Mr. C. He had heard that Mr. B was currently working as the top leader and wondered if Mr. C had been removed from the leadership by Mr. B, because leadership conflicts are commonplace in self-help groups in Japan. If that was the case, Mr. C could have very negative feelings toward Mr. B. Oka assumed that Mr. C was still as well respected by his peers as he had been when they worked together 13 years previously. Asking help from two people might imply that Oka could not trust either of them sufficiently. If the two were in conflict, the results for the person seeking help could be very destructive.

Oka decided to telephone Mr. C directly. Mr. C sounded confused by his unexpected call and did not seem to remember Oka very well. "I'm very sorry. I am too old. I have retired from the leadership of Sobriety Alliance. I'm sorry I cannot help you." Oka asked him if he could make contact with Mr. B, and he replied, "OK, OK, he is a nice guy." Oka had gotten the permission of this man to

whom he felt *giri*. Oka then telephoned Mr. B, and told him that he had already telephoned Mr. C and received his permission to proceed. By doing this, Oka wanted to show Mr. B that he was “a person who meticulously observes [*giri*] practices,” because in Japan such a person “is praised as *giri-gatai hito* (person who discharges his social duties faithfully) [italics added]” (Mitsubishi, 1988, p. 33).

In this case illustration, we see that a *giri* relationship can last for many years, and ignoring the relationship can lead to the disgrace of the *giri* creditor. Due to these *giri* relationships, it is undesirable for researchers to change the people they need to depend on, even if they later find that person to be inept or involved in serious conflicts with other group leaders. Therefore, finding a suitable first contact person is crucial for field researchers.

Case 2: Acceptance Beyond a *Giri* Relationship

In this case study, we continue with Oka and Chenhall’s research with the Sobriety Alliance. After Oka and Chenhall made contact with the main office of the Sobriety Alliance through Oka’s *giri* network, they were able to start their period of research. This involved an intensive period while Chenhall was residing in Japan during 2006-2007 and three subsequent visits between 2008-2010. In addition to significant archival research concerning the history of the Sobriety Alliance in Japan, Oka and Chenhall conducted semi-structured interviews with various leaders, in addition to attending different Sobriety Alliance meetings (each ward in the city had its own Sobriety Alliance sub-organization with its own program of meetings), as well as large scale national meetings and special workshops. The Sobriety Alliance gave Oka and Chenhall details of leaders and other members they could contact. As Oka had re-engaged his *giri* relationship with leaders, they also became active in the research process inviting Oka and Chenhall to various events. Chenhall’s presence as a foreigner aided their entry to the Sobriety Alliance. At meetings, members would often be surprised at Chenhall’s interest (why would a foreigner be interested in a Japanese self-help group for alcoholics?) and state that they felt compelled to work harder in their organizations as it was internationally known. Also, Oka’s affiliation with social work, rather than with the medical profession, meant that he was different to many of the Sobriety Alliance advisors, who were in the main medical professions. However, Sobriety Alliance members were well aware of Oka’s contribution to the self-help field and would often come to an interview with a purchased copy of his book about self-help groups.

Over the past 4 years, Chenhall and Oka’s association with the Sobriety Alliance has changed. During the first 2 years of their research, the Sobriety Alliance accepted their presence as formal guests. Formal guests are an important part of meetings. It is common for doctors, nurses, and social workers to be present at meetings, but most commonly at the large national yearly meetings, in

which administrative officials of local governments and even members of the National Diet of Japan often attend. The participation of formal guests is highly managed at such events, which can have up to 3,000 participants. When Oka and Chenhall arrived at a national meeting, they were invited to join other guests in a visitor's room, where lunch boxes and refreshments were served, in many cases by middle-aged and older women who are the wives or mothers of the members. The service provided by these female members mean that the guests are politely and warmly treated, as if they were welcomed as family. In Japan, family guests are often served by the housewife, and members of the self-help group often liken their group to a big family. Various leaders would enter this room freely, greeting the various guests (mainly doctors and psychiatrists) and exiting again, while rank-and-file members clearly refrain from entering the room. When the meeting begins, all guests would be ushered into named seats on the staged area, lit by a spotlight. It is very important to be respectful of the organization's processes in this matter, but as Oka and Chenhall's involvement deepened, they were able to spend time (usually after the morning formalities were completed) with other members.

Formal interviews and discussions in such guest reception areas often gave Oka and Chenhall responses that could be labelled as *tatamae*, the official and public representation of views or standpoints. The relevance of *tatamae* and *honne* in research contexts has been extensively discussed elsewhere. Johnson (2002) in his research with Japanese legal prosecutors, notes that officials in Japan often distinguish between the two when explaining and justifying their behavior and that individuals who "inappropriately reveal their *honne*—especially to outsiders—can be harshly criticised by their colleagues" (p. 143). In this work, Johnson found that drinking alcohol with his informants was an important way through which individuals could express their *honne* outside the rigid hierarchical structures of their work roles. Of course this was not possible for Oka and Chenhall, who were examining a self-help group for alcoholics who were supposed to be abstinent. Over the past 4 years, as Oka and Chenhall have been invited to attend more intimate local meetings and have spent time with specific members, they have had access to people's *honne*, their real intentions and feelings. Critical has been Oka and Chenhall's presence at many meetings through the years and their willingness to not place any undue demands on Sobriety Alliance members or organizations that may be interpreted as a threat to the maintenance of a trusted relationship.

In 2010, Oka and Chenhall were asked to join a national meeting, but this time they were invited by one sub-group of the Sobriety Alliance national organization to stay with them in their hotel, eating and socializing together. This was an important breakthrough in their research and during their stay they were able to participate in conversations that reflected people's *honne*. What was also important in transforming their relationship with the Sobriety Alliance, from one where people would share their information based on a sense of *giri* to one

based on *ninjo*, was their identification of common personal feelings that connected them as human beings. Chenhall was at first surprised when at the meeting of this particular sub-group at a national meeting in 2010, Oka spoke out about issues related to his personal life, concerning the welfare of his elderly parents and his difficulties in concentrating and listening to members' stories. National meetings were often very similar to local group meetings where individual members spoke publicly about their experiences with alcohol (see Chenhall & Oka, 2009, for details). Oka had previously spoken at a number of Sobriety Alliance meetings, but he often spoke more generally about his self-help group research. In this forum, he did not try to identify with the experiences of being an alcoholic, but instead stated that his own personal issues had reminded him about a central tent of the Sobriety Alliance approach, that is, listening to other members' speeches:

In fact, my father is now seriously ill, and I worry a lot about him and my mother who is taking care of him. Despite this, I came here. To be honest, I thought I had to cancel the attendance of this meeting. However, because Richard Chenhall came all this way to Japan to join you, and you kindly invited me, I decided to come here. Coming here, I found it difficult for me to concentrate on the experience talks of the attendees, because my thoughts were for my parents. Then, I supposed it would also be difficult for you to listen to other members' talks, because you also have a lot of difficulties in your families. I again realised why leaders emphasised the importance of listening to others' talks.

At first, this seemed at odds with Chenhall's experience in Australia. If asked to speak in such a forum, an academic would discuss current research in the field or research findings related to the group's specific area of interest. It also differed to what Chenhall had heard from other Japanese social scientists, speaking at self-help group meetings, who often gave therapeutic oriented speeches, advising members how to stay abstinent. However, Oka did not do this. In fact, he was responding to the Sobriety Alliance's special invitation extended to them, to stay and socialize with them at their hotel. This invitation transformed their relationships with Sobriety Alliance members from *giri* to one based on *ninjo*, thus allowing for the sharing of personal feelings. Oka was reflecting this in his speech. However, he made no attempt to identify with the members' experiences themselves, instead carefully relating his own current experience to the principles of the organization. His statements were non-patronizing, empathetic, and supportive of the Sobriety Alliance healing approach.

Chenhall, however, was viewed as a foreign researcher and members often shared their feelings and views with him quite freely, because he was considered an outsider to the Japanese system. Sobriety Alliance members were often interested in Chenhall's reflections on alcoholism in his home country and his observations of the similarities and differences in alcohol related problems between Japan and Australia. His statements about alcohol policies and problems in

Australia were not out of place at the Sobriety Alliance meeting and were expected from a foreigner speaking. Although Chenhall felt, at first, that the differences between his own and Oka's speech was at odds, he later realized that Sobriety Alliance members often related to him differently. As Chenhall was not Japanese and was not a permanent resident of Japan, he was outside the restraints of *giri*. Nevertheless, other academics and Sobriety Alliance members viewed Chenhall as the junior scholar, working under the tutelage of Oka, so his experiences and access were dependent on Oka's management of *giri*. For Chenhall, this meant he was able to observe and come to understand Japanese research approaches, but by the very nature of this connection to Oka, Chenhall felt that he could not ignore these approaches. This raises some important issues for the conduct of collaborative research into self-help groups, involving researchers from a host and visiting country. Truly collaborative research requires a high degree of reflexivity on the part of both researchers and has both advantages and disadvantages.

Case 3: Failure in a *Giri* Relationship

The third case is about Oka's failure to develop trusted relations with a mental health self-help group, called Group Freedom (*pseudonym*). This case is quite different from the first and second cases, and as such, it will shed further light on the reciprocity of *giri* relationships.

Group Freedom is run entirely by mental health service consumers and is independent from any professional agencies. The leader of Group Freedom was a woman, Ms. D, whom Oka had known for several years. Oka had sometimes contributed to the group by writing articles for their newsletters. Although Group Freedom had operated for several years as a well-known self-help group, very few scholars had attempted to do any research with them until one of Oka's MA students, Mr. E, wanted to conduct research with a self-help group for mental health service consumers, and Oka suggested that he look at Group Freedom. Oka believed that this student would be accepted by the group, as the leader was considered to be indebted to him because Oka had made some contributions to the group without receiving any monetary rewards. Additionally, the student had a lot of experience of helping people with mental illness as a skilled social worker, and Oka expected that that experience would help him build trust with the group members.

After the student was first introduced to the group, several months passed without any problems. The student conducted several individual interviews with the leader and these interviews were tape recorded. He also spent some weeks making participant observations on various activities undertaken by the group, many of which were for recreational purposes.

However, one day, Oka suddenly got a telephone call from Ms. D, the leader of Group Freedom. She said that she had decided to stop any further cooperation with their research and that she required Oka and the student not to use any of the

information collected. Oka was very confused, because he had not previously received any complaints from either Ms. D or the student. When Oka asked her for clarification, Ms. D did not express her complaints clearly. When Oka talked to his student about it, he was very shocked because he could not imagine why the leader would have any grievances against him. Oka and the student decided to talk with the leader directly to find out what had made her decide to stop the research process.

Oka, the student, and Ms. D met in the office of Group Freedom, and talked together very cordially as if there were no problems between them. The leader did not directly say what the problem was, probably because she wanted to save face for all parties concerned. After the discussion had ended, the student and Oka discussed what might have made her angry, because they were certain of only one thing, she was angry with the student.

Oka and the student finally concluded that the student had failed to catch her “unvoiced” requests. As a result, the leader felt that reciprocity was lost. She had given him a lot and he had given her only a little in return. For example, the leader told him that Group Freedom was carrying out a signature-collecting campaign in order to try to change social policy. The student showed interest in the project, but failed to say that he would be ready to collect signatures himself. Although the leader did not ask for his help, she waited for him to offer his help voluntarily, and he did not. Another example was when the leader asked him to be an instructor for their English conversation class, and the student declined because he believed that he was poor at English. However, the leader thought that a graduate student of a university, which is famous for its foreign language education, would obviously have better English skills than ordinary members of Group Freedom. She therefore concluded that he was being very uncooperative. At the beginning of his research, Oka visited the Group with him, and facilitated the interaction between the leader and the student. However, once Oka judged that the student could carry on his research without help, he stopped accompanying him. This also seemed to have offended the leader. She had hoped that the research would be done by Oka, not by the novice student only.

What lessons can we draw from this case illustration? First, we have to calculate the amount of indebtedness that we have to the leaders of the groups we are researching, and the amount of indebtedness they have to us, and keep these in balance. If group leaders feel they are offering much more than the researchers are offering them in return, then reciprocity is lost and cooperation with the research will be withdrawn. Second, it is essential to be self-reflexive in the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2010) and to be responsive to the changing relationships we might develop through time with research partners. Third, “*giri* refers not simply to an ‘obligation’—a kind of Kantian abstract moral imperative—but to an obligation toward somebody, and, more specifically, toward a particular person” (Wierzbicka, 1997, p. 263). Even when a leader feels *giri* to a researcher and is ready to accept the research proposal, he or she is not necessarily

ready to accept the researcher's student, toward whom the leader does not have any *giri*. Fourth, researchers should remember that, due to their cultural norm, research participants might not complain about the eroded reciprocity until the last moment when they decide to withdraw from participating in the research. When they begin to talk, the timing for any re-negotiation might be over.

IMPLICATION OF *GIRI* FOR FIELD RESEARCH

In Japan, a relationship of *giri* between researchers and research participants is unavoidable, and therefore it is important to consider the implications of *giri* for field research on self-help groups. This article has discussed three methodological points related to *giri* in self-help group research in Japan:

1. permanent *giri*-relationships;
2. *giri* and *tatema* (superficial appearance); and
3. repayment of *giri*.

First, *giri* can last permanently (Wierzbicka, 1997, p. 265), and so researchers of self-help groups may feel indebted to their research participants for the rest of their working life. In fact, there are many Japanese researchers who remain connected to the same self-help group for the length of their career. "Leaving the field" (Laine, 2000, pp. 141-142) is not seriously considered. The permanence of *giri* relationships makes it much harder for researchers to maintain the anonymity of research participants. Within the academic and self-help group community, many people know which organizations certain researchers are working with. Consequently, researchers can be hesitant to be overly critical or include "sensitive topics" in their reports (Lee, 1993). Due to the permanence of the relationship and the rivalry between self-help groups, it also means that research with other self-help group organizations can be difficult.

Second, most researchers in Japan will find gaining entry to research sites easy through *giri* relationships. However, unless they change their *giri*-relationship (the relationship that people feel obliged to build regardless of their feelings) with the research participants into a *ninjō*-relationship (the relationship that is maintained by people's true feelings), they will hear nothing but *tatema* (official stance), and see only *omote* (the surface) of the organization. It will take a lot of effort to gain access to research participants' *honne* (personal feelings) and observe the *ura* (hidden aspect) of an organization. In order to change the *giri*-relationship into *ninjō*-relationship, the researchers have to develop "long-term relationships" with the research participants, which are based on mutual trust and cultural understanding (Bestor, Steinhoff, & Bestor, 2003).

Third, researchers are expected to repay their research participants. Because the importance of social research has not yet been socially recognized in Japan (Fujita, 1999; Nakao, 1998; Tsurutani, 1985), research reports and their influence over changes in social policies are not often seen as sufficient repayment. Instead,

researchers are asked to take on various roles that are outside their normal researcher role. In giving advice about conducting research in Japan, McLaughlin (2010) states:

Make yourself useful. Don't just hang around and take notes; to the extent that is practical and ethically permissible . . . , integrate yourself by taking on responsibility within the group. The more responsibility you shoulder within an organization, the deeper your connections will be. Be prepared to volunteer to do the most basic grunt work that is perceived as undesirable within the organization. Get your hands dirty in a visible, non-complaining way.

Researchers may get involved in different kinds of ways. This could be in the offering of practical help such as putting heavy chairs away after meetings. They may also be required to play roles of authority, consultant, advocate, propagandist, essay-writer-for-newsletters, lecturer, volunteer, and conversationalist. Importantly, researchers may be expected to provide these services without the solicitation of research participants. However, the exact nature of these services may, at times, be difficult to determine and require a high degree of reflexivity and perceptiveness of an organizations' perspectives and expectations.

Is *giri* unique to Japan? How should we understand *giri* with respect to PAR methodologies? In the sense that it directs a researcher's actions in establishing and conducting her/himself with research participants and organizations, in absence of any formal guidelines or ethical institutional processes, *giri* is quite unique. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, there are formal guidelines around research processes and human research ethics committees, through which all research is assessed and evaluated. In Japan formal research guidelines and ethics process are often viewed with distrust, as noted by Bestor, Steinhoff, and Bestor (2003):

In a society where the careful cultivation of interpersonal trust is given far greater weight than formal contracts and where written contracts are often viewed with distrust, there are many research situations in which American-style legalistic consent requirements would not only be culturally unfamiliar, but would call into question the researcher's cultural understanding and trustworthiness. (p. 14)

Building mutual trust in fieldwork is not unique in the social science methodological literature. In a study of the insider-outsider status of different research participants in a study of mental health and psycho-social policy formation in Timor-Leste and the Solomon Island, Ritchie and colleagues (2009) found that researchers believed that data collection was dependent on cultivating positive relationships and building trust: "Those working in the community-focused data collection particularly were adamant that only if trust was built could the study be confident of achieving credible findings" (p. 109). However, this was not an opinion shared by other researchers in the project, who believed that close

relationships during data collection could lead to biased and non-credible findings, preventing the researchers from expressing alternate or critical views.

How do the kinds of roles and relationships built between researchers and self-help organizations reflect on PAR methodologies? In the case examples here, participants were not, at first, interested in the objectives of the research project, but were more concerned with a number of issues connected to their relationships with the researchers and their expectations about the researchers' contributions. In Case 3, Oka's students failed to pick up on members' "unvoiced" requests to help them in their political efforts. In Cases 1 and 2, the relationships between Oka and Chenhall and the Sobriety Alliance had to be established over time and considerable effort was spent on managing *giri* between various researchers and their contacts. It was only when these relationships were built over a number of years, with many hours spent by both researchers attending various meetings and workshops all over Japan, that the Sobriety Alliance began to allow Oka and Chenhall into the more private domains in which members interact and asked them to contribute to newsletters, to discussion between leaders about their organizations, and to make presentation at various meetings.

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