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# SELF-HELP GROUPS IN JAPAN: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CURRENT ISSUES

**TOMOFUMI OKA, PH.D.**
*Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan*

**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this article is to trace the historical development of self-help groups in Japan, and to discuss current issues that Japanese self-help groups face in their relationships with professionals and in civil society. This particular history is divided into five phases: from ancient times to the 1910s, the 1920s to the early 1950s, the late 1950s through the 1970s, the 1980s to the 1990s, and 2000 and beyond. In addition, the political situations and the influence of Western culture on self-help groups are described. Current issues in self-help groups' relationships with professionals are caused by the professionals' disregard for communal learning of "experiential knowledge" through self-help groups, and also their confusion concerning the difference between peer-led self-help groups and professional-led support groups. Furthermore, I discuss problems relating to changes in the Japanese legal status of "public benefit corporation" which impacts self-help groups.

**Key Words**: self-help groups, Japan, history, social movements

The aim of this article is to give a short historical description of self-help groups in Japan and to discuss the current issues in the relationships between self-help groups and supporting professionals in Japanese civil society. The Western history of self-help groups has been traced in several articles including Katz and




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Bender (1976) and Hurvitz (1976), but there are very few articles on the local history of self-help groups in Japan even though self-help groups have been historically active (Munn-Giddings, Oka, Borkman, Mazat, & Montano, in press). A historical analysis of self-help groups in a non-Western society would shed fresh light on the nature and cultural relationships of self-help groups.

This article has four sections: the first takes the characteristics of Japan as the subject of a case study of non-Western industrialized society. The second and main section is a description of the history of self-help groups in Japan. The last two sections discuss current issues: the third section deals with issues that self-help groups have in their relationships with professionals, and the last section examines legal issues that self-help groups face in Japanese civil society.

## JAPAN AS A CASE STUDY

Before discussing Japan as a case study of non-Western society, it is advisable to avoid generalizations of such societies. For example, readers might expect that discussing the Japanese case would lead to a better understanding of other industrialized Asian countries and areas, including Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. However, as Huntington (1996) states, the above countries and areas belong to Sinic (Chinese) civilization, while Japan does not. Japan is recognized as "a distinct civilization which was the offspring of Chinese civilization" (p. 45). Concerning the historical background of self-help groups, the most distinct cultural difference between Japanese and Chinese civilizations is the development of clans. The Chinese civilization has active clans whereas the Japanese does not (Cheng, 1995; Hsu, 1963; Liu, 1998; Pei, 1998). The traditional lack of this large human network tied by blood could be responsible for the relatively early development of self-help groups in Japan. Also, unlike countries in Europe and North America, there are very few interactions between self-help groups in the Asian countries of Sinic culture and those in Japan, the one notable exception being the case of groups for people with disabilities (Hayashi & Okuhira, 2008; Kwok, Chan, & Chan, 2002).

Samuel Smiles and Peter Kropotkin were the two great thinkers who influenced the philosophical bases of the self-help movements in Western countries (Froland, Pancoast, & Parker, 1983), and their ideas have resonated in Japanese culture as well. The importance of "mutual aid" that Kropotkin stressed was traditionally accepted by the collectivist Japanese but, surprisingly, Smiles's magnum opus *Self-Help; with Illustrations of Character, Conduct and Perseverance* (1871) was widely read and appreciated in late 19th-century Japan as well. Kinmonth (1980) states:

> In early 1871, members of the samurai class, especially government officials and educators, were lining up—even camping out overnight—to buy copies of a work that attacked hereditary wealth and power from its very

> first line, "Heaven helps those who help themselves." . . . Commonly and quite correctly, *Saikoku rishi hen* [the title of the translated book] is described as one of the "holy books" . . . of the Meiji era [1868-1912]. (pp. 535-536)

"Heaven helps those who help themselves" is still a well-known saying among modern Japanese, and its value orientation has apparently promoted self-help movements in Japan.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-HELP GROUPS

Japan is a country in which very old traditions and modern ideas coexist in harmony. The Japanese people have been greatly influenced by Western countries—especially by the United States since the end of World War II—but, even after the abandonment of a two-century-long national isolation policy in the 1850s, many of the Japanese traditions remain intact. Since some these traditions are related to voluntary groups, we need to consider how they have affected civil movements of self-help.

Japan continues to suffer from a two-decade-long financial recession. Japan's population is the most aged in the world, and the country's huge deficit has led to a crisis in the management of social and medical services. In this context Japan is now exploring a new and challenging frontier that many other developed countries have never experienced but will probably face in the near future.

In this section, I will discuss the historical background of Japanese self-help groups by surveying five time periods, each associated with a particular cultural influence:

1. ancient times to the 1910s: traditional self-help organizations;
2. the 1920s to the early 1950s: self-help groups under the influence of Marxist movements and political conservatism; and
3. the late 1950s through the 1970s: self-help groups associated with civil rights movements; (4) the 1980s through the 1990s: self-help groups under the influence of Western counterparts; (5) the 2000s and beyond: self-help groups in the age of the Internet and financial recession.

### Ancient Times to the 1910s: Traditional Self-Help Organizations

Japan was home to one of the oldest forms of self-help groups for the blind: "From an early age the [Japanese] blind appear to have banded together, both to aid each other and to strengthen their position vis-à-vis local and national authorities" (Groemer, 2001, p. 350). These groups' activities are evidenced by edicts issued by the national authorities in the mid-13th century which aimed to control their activities as blind mendicants. The blind developed guilds which

worked as independent and hierarchical mutual-aid organizations. Blind women musicians, for example, organized their own small groups in the Tokugawa period (from the 17th to the 19th centuries). These pre-modern self-organized groups succeeded in improving conditions for the blind for several hundred years. When the Japanese government decided to Westernize the governing structure of these groups, the blind were deprived of their organizational autonomy; the guild system was considered to be obsolete. However, their established network enabled the organization of a national association for the blind in 1909 whose first aim was to publish books in Braille.

Encouraged by this, deaf people also organized themselves into a national association in 1915 by combining local self-help groups, although they had to depend on the support of teachers of deaf education (Fujimoto, 1971). These self-help movements of people with sensory disabilities were moderate in their social action and relatively well supported by the general public.

## The 1920s to the Early 1950s: Self-Help Groups Under the Influence of Marxist Movements and Political Conservatism

In this period, including during War World II, self-help groups were actively influenced by one of two opposing ideologies: Marxism and political conservatism. The former were supported by Marxist union leaders and the latter by local conservative administrations.

While the movements established by people with sensory disabilities were moderate and well supported by the general public as an extension of the tradition of mutual aid, a new kind of social action and advocacy group appeared in the 1920s: the *Buraku* liberation movement (Neary, 1989; Yoshino, 1983). Although the definition of Buraku is still controversial, members were generally "portrayed as a fragment of the non-ruling classes in Japanese society, ostracized throughout history on the whims of the ruling class and marginalized from mainstream society on the basis of their occupation, such as leatherwork or butchering" (Amos, 2007, p. 155).

Influenced by Marxist and socialist ideas, Buraku people organized aggressive social action against the discriminatory attitudes prevalent among Japanese authorities and Japanese society in general (Amos, 2007). As the first Japanese anti-discrimination movement, it provided the prototype for subsequent liberation movements for invalids or people with physical disabilities.

Patients with leprosy who were living in asylums organized themselves in the 1930s, again inspired by Marxist ideas, and began to negotiate aggressively with asylum administrations for improvements in their living conditions. In 1947, many patients in tuberculosis asylums started to organize themselves with the same goals. Marxist patients and veteran patients had different national organizations because of differing political orientations, but in 1948 they united

into one national organization (Nihon Kanja Dōmei) with the common goal of improving patients' lives (Hosoda, 2009; Nihon Kanja Dōmei, 1991).

Following World War II there were numerous bereaved families and wives, and countless veterans with physical disabilities. These groups also started to organize themselves soon after the end of the war with the generous support of local (conservative) administrators who were concerned that Marxists would infiltrate such groups and organize them into Marxist "cells." As the Occupation Army of the United Nations prohibited veterans from coming together, wounded veterans established self-help groups for "people with physical disabilities." In reality, these groups were for veterans only in many cases (Oka, 1991).

## The Late 1950s through the 1970s: Self-Help Groups Associated with Civil Rights Movements

In line with the worldwide emergence of civil rights movements in the 1960s, various movements, such as environmental groups, feminist groups, and anti-war groups appeared in Japan. Many health-related self-help groups also flourished. After the growth of groups at the local level, national associations were established with branches throughout Japan: by parents of children with mental retardation (1952) (Inclusion Japan, 2001; Tsuda, 2006), alcoholics (1963), people with disabilities (1963) (Hayashi & Okuhira, 2001), families of people with mental illness (1965) (Oshima & Nakai, 1993), neurotics (1970) (Higa, 2009), and people with mental illness (1974) ("Byo"-sha, 1995). Inspired by the success of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which originated in the United States, in 1953 the Japan Temperance Union started a support group for alcoholics in Tokyo, modifying the AA's 12 Steps and 12 Traditions to create their own program suited to the Japanese context. Five years later, peer-led self-help groups were established; some of the founders were former members of the support group. These groups united to form a national association, called Zendanren, in 1963, without any direct influence from AA. It wasn't until 18 years later, in 1981, that the first Japanese-speaking AA office opened in Japan (Alcoholics Anonymous Japan, 1995, p. 15).

Compared to groups established in the previous period, these groups were not necessarily politically oriented. For example, the alcoholics' organizations declared that they would not be involved with any political issues. Secondly, these groups were financially and politically independent from people or organizations outside the groups; groups established in the previous period had and were operating in consultation with their supporters, whether political parties or local administrations.

## The 1980 through the 1990s: Self-Help Groups under the Influence of Western Counterparts

As the Japanese became wealthier in the 1980s, self-help group leaders and members had more opportunities to go abroad and meet their foreign counterparts.

This exposed them to new ideas and led to the further development of Japanese self-help groups. The best example of this phenomenon is the group for people with physical disabilities.

> The 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons prompted visits by advocates from the United States, including the pioneers of the US disability rights and independent living movements. . . . Motivated by the stories of these US advocates, some Japanese participants took advantage of a scholarship programme offered by a foundation that enabled them to go to the United States and study at the centres for independent living. . . . Thus, a new breed of advocates was trained in the United States in 1980s. (Hayashi & Okuhira, 2001, pp. 865-866)

This "new breed of advocates" created a new type of self-help movement: one that provided care services for people with disabilities who wanted to live in communities. Previously groups had provided few care services and tended mainly to organize social action against administrations.

In 1985, three different national associations of patients and parents established exchange programs with Swedish groups. The Japanese leaders admitted surprise at the existence of patient organizations in Sweden, because they believed that such organizations would not be needed in "advanced" welfare states (Nihon Kanja Dōmei, 1991, p. 48). This episode shows that Japanese self-help groups working before the 1980s had developed with little Western influence, except for the alcoholics' organization, the founders of which were inspired by AA.

Various 12-step groups are another set of self-help groups that emerged in this period, although Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon pre-dated the 1980s (AA was started in 1975, and Al-Anon in 1979) (Al-Anon, 1990; Alcoholics Anonymous Japan, 1995). Examples include Narcotics Anonymous (1980), Nar-Anon (1989) (Iwata, 1993), Bulimics Anonymous (1984) (which later became Overeaters Anonymous) (Overeaters Anonymous Japan, n.d.), Gamblers Anonymous (1989) (Takiguchi & Rosenthal, 2011), and Gam-Anon (1991) (Gam-Anon, n.d.). Although there has been very little research on these 12-step groups in Japan (AA being an exception), Japanese websites are maintained by various 12-step groups such as Sexaholics Anonymous, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, S-Anon, Sex & Love Addicts Anonymous, Adult Children Anonymous, Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, and Debtors Anonymous. These anonymous groups are working with North American counterparts and using books translated from English as well as books that they have created from their members' experience and stories.

In sum, the 1980s and 1990s were a period of economic boom in Japan, and thanks to this extraordinary affluence numerous Japanese had opportunities to go abroad to enjoy interaction with their counterparts in foreign countries, especially Western countries. Japanese self-helpers learned a great deal from

Western self-help groups, and they started or reorganized their self-help groups along the lines of foreign groups.

## The New Century—2000 and Beyond: Self-Help Groups in the Age of the Internet and Financial Recession

This recent period is characterized by the prevalence of the Internet and the prolonged financial recession in Japan, which is referred to as "the lost two decades." The Internet greatly benefits people looking for self-help groups or who want to start their own groups. It also enables existing groups to make themselves known to the general public (Akimoto, 2006).

On the other hand, the prolonged financial recession has reduced the number of permanent employees, and the amount of disposable income that people can dedicate to social activities. The influence of the financial difficulties on people's social life is not clear: as Cheung and Ng (2012) state, "a financial crisis is supposed to jeopardize social life," whereas "a financial crisis seems to enhance social solidarity or cohesion" (p. 623). In reality, the difficult economic situation has made people's problems more complicated and severe. Many potential members of self-help groups are now jobless, friendless, and without family; they survive on welfare in a society where the individualization (atomization) of people is constantly promoted (Ronald & Hirayama, 2009; Suzuki, Ito, Ishida, Nihei, & Maruyama, 2010). Self-help groups have traditionally been organized around a single issue, such as alcoholism, or specific diseases and disabilities and they might not be very helpful to people with more complicated problems living in contemporary Japan. For example, an alcoholic who had joined a self-help group was once considered "somewhat healthy" apart from his alcoholism: he still had his family, friends, job, and a certain degree of social skills. However, now an alcoholic might have nothing; he or she might live in poverty, be of advanced age, lonely, and have few social skills due to prolonged isolation. Consequently, self-help groups with programs that target alcoholism are now taking up challenges to face problems not previously dealt with (Oka, 2013a).

Online self-help groups are now appearing as a new type of self-help group. While many papers praise the great potential of the Internet for self-help movements (e.g., Smedberg, 2012), in Japan some self-help group leaders have complained about the negative aspects of the Internet. For example, some people want information from a website without contributing to the group, or they are satisfied by virtual meetings, so that the self-help organization's "real" group stops growing.

This pessimistic view of the Internet's contribution to self-help groups might be explained by cultural differences (Ji, Hwangbo, Yi, Rau, Fang, & Ling, 2010). For example, in a comparative study of Japanese and Koreans, Ishii and Ogasahara (2007) point out that compared to Koreans, Japanese tend not to consider "personal relations via the online community" as "closely associated

with . . . real-world personal relations" (p. 252). Other studies show that many Japanese tend to protect their real names and photos on social networks (Adams, Murata, Orito, & Parslow, 2011; Barker & Ota, 2011; Tabuchi, 2011), which may make it difficult for self-help groups to develop online.

However, positive views on the use of the Internet for self-help groups are also given by empirical research. For example, Setoyama, Yamazaki, and Nakayama (2011) conducted a survey of over 1,000 breast cancer patients in Japan, and compared the support provided by online self-help groups and face-to-face groups. They found that "online communities and face-to-face support groups have different characteristics" (p. e99): while face-to-face groups offer more "emotional support" and "insight" about their situations, online communities provide more advice. They conclude that "the two resources are complementary to each other" (p. e99). Also, when people are looking for those who have similar experiences, the Internet is always very helpful, especially in cases where the experiences are very rare, invisible, or hidden because of social stigma.

## CURRENT ISSUES WITH PROFESSIONALS

In this section, I discuss current issues that Japanese self-help groups face in their relationships with supporting professionals. These issues can be classified into two types: individually or group related.

The first issue is that supporting professionals tend to trivialize the "experiential knowledge" (Borkman, 1976) of self-help groups by identifying it as knowledge that individuals get from their idiosyncratic experience. Consequently, there is no attention paid to self-help groups' experiential knowledge gained through working within the group but professionals often wrongly identify individuals who have only their own personal experience, uninformed by working within a group. As Borkman (1999) states:

> A reflective process is necessary to convert "raw experience"—which is often a jumble of inchoate images, thoughts, impressions, and feelings—into meaningful knowledge, which implies some form, coherence, and meaning. . . . A key point about self-help groups is that the reflective process occurs with others who have shared the same experience and thus have specialized information about it and a personal stake in its interpretation. This communal learning can produce "collective experiential knowledge," which is qualitatively different from one person's idiosyncratic interpretation of his experience. (p. 16)

Instead of this communal learning being recognized as something unique arising from the experience of the peer led self-help group, Japanese who have direct experience are called *tōjisha*, and they are often considered as having the right to a place of respect in the matters they have experience. McLelland (2009) explains the term *tōjisha* as follows:

> Originally developed in a legal context where it referred to the "parties" in court proceedings, in the 1970s tôjisha was taken up by citizens' groups campaigning for the right of self determination for the "parties concerned" facing discrimination and has become a central concept for all minority self-advocacy groups. (p. 193)

More importantly, it is considered irrelevant whether tôjisha is a member of self-help group or an isolated individual. As McLelland (2009) points out:

> In legal proceedings, *tōjisha* parties are situated within an adversarial context where their perspective is privileged in relation to "third parties" (*daisansha*) or *hi-tōjisha*, that is, non-*tōjisha* (those not directly concerned). As a result, the deployment of the term *tōjisha*, irrespective of the context, has tended to set up rather stark contrasts between *tōjisha* and *daisansha* or *hi-tōjisha*. This is one reason why scholars, not only from the field of law but also from disciplines such as sociology and psychology, often structure their arguments in a dichotomous framework that pits *tōjisha* against *hi-tōjisha*. (p. 195)

Under such a simple dichotomy of *tōjisha* or non-*tōjisha*, many people who have direct experience on the matter but have never experienced "communal learning" in a self-help group are working as volunteers in various social and medical service fields: they are called *piakaunserā* [peer counselor] or *piasapōtā* [peer supporter] in medical or social service settings (Hama, 2009; Oishi, Kido, Hayashi, & Inanaga, 2007). While the public activities of *tōjisha* promote the empowerment of those who have been in socially disadvantageous situations, such activities could lead to the minimization of the power of "experiential knowledge" and a lack of appreciation about its impact on group members' perspectives.

Another issue that is important in relationships with supporting professionals is that there is confusion among professionals concerning the differences between professional-led support groups and peer-led self-help groups, especially as they are both called *jijogurūpu* (self-help groups). For example, in the official guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Kosei Rōdōshō) for educational curriculums for certified social workers in 2008, a "self-help group" is considered part of social work with groups (Kosei Rōdōshō, 2008). This implies that a "self-help group" is regarded as a kind of social group work or a group-therapeutic tool that is facilitated and utilized by a social worker.

This confusion induces supporting professionals to neglect the "liberating meaning perspectives" (Borkman, 1999) of peer-led self-help groups because such perspectives often criticize and oppose professional frameworks, in which clients are subordinate to the professional authorities. For example, in Japan there are numerous professional-led support groups for family survivors of suicide, and the related professionals often call them "self-help groups." This irritates leaders of peer-led self-help groups because they have an opposing viewpoint on how to help the survivors. Professional-led support groups focus on survivors' psychological needs and attempt to help them "overcome" their

grief, whereas peer-led self-help groups "accept" the members' grief as a natural reaction after their traumatic events and focus on social issues such as social discrimination against family survivors of suicide. Peer-led self-help groups claim that suicide should be treated as a "normal" cause of death. They advocate "living with grief" as their "liberating meaning perspective"; however, supporting professionals consider such lifelong grief as pathological and encourage survivors to receive professional psychological "grief care," with which the survivors are expected to "overcome" their grief (Oka, 2013b; Oka & Borkman, 2011).

It is crucial for self-help groups to emphasize these different perspectives, because local government bureaucrats often consider self-help groups as nothing but "lay groups lacking professional supervision." Consequently, the bureaucrats tend to trust professional-led support groups more than peer-led self-help groups and allocate them greater public resources—such as meeting places or public relations—than they do peer-led self-help groups.

## SELF-HELP GROUPS IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Although mutual help has been considered as very important in Japan (Oka, 1994), "mutual-benefit organizations," which were supposed to include self-help groups, have not been well treated in the legal system. Simon (2009) points out:

> It should be noted that until 2001 no not-for-profit legal entity in Japan was permitted to be established as a mutual benefit organization (MBO). This was a glaring oversight in the Japanese approach to civil society—the failure to recognize such organizations as legally registered civil society organizations under the Civil Code or related legislation simply failed properly to implement the freedom of association guaranteed by Article 21 of the Japanese Constitution. (p. 15)

This meant that no mutual-benefit organizations had any legal status until the end of the 20th century.

> As a result, many of the mutual-benefit organizations had no choice but to be organized as voluntary groups without legal capabilities as judicial persons, inconveniencing themselves in owning real estate and concluding contracts. Some mutual-benefit organizations were allowed to register themselves as public benefit corporations, drawing criticism from society. Against that background, the "Mutual-Benefit Corporation Law" was put into force in April 2002 to seal the "loophole," opening the way for authorizing such organizations as legal corporations. (Ohta, 2006, p. 76)

However, the Mutual-Benefit Corporation Law did not make mutual-benefit organizations exempt from taxation, because a mutual-benefit organization was not considered as being a "not-for-profit corporation" (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PWC], 2009). Therefore, almost no self-help groups became Mutual-Benefit Corporations. Self-help groups gained legal recognition as different "not-for-profit

public benefit legal entities." While small self-help groups obtained legal entity as a SNPC (Special Nonprofit Activities Legal Person), many large organizations became an Association (*shadan hōjin,* based on Civil Code, Article 34) or Social Welfare Corporation (*shakaifukushi hōjin*) (cf. Simon, 2009, p. 17).

In 2006, a new legal framework was introduced to reform the public benefit corporation system. Within the framework, Associations (shadan hōjin) had to decide whether to become Public Benefit Corporations or General Non-Profit Corporations, the former having charitable status, the latter not. Although many Associations wanted to keep their recognized charitable status because of the tax exemption, "there are quite a number of too-complicated qualifications that [Associations] must satisfy to qualify for and maintain tax-exempt status" (Ogawa, 2004, p. 47). The requirements for charitable status are very altruistic and philanthropic. For example:

> An NPO can qualify as a [Public Benefit Corporation] if it intends to provide significant benefits (a) to the public-at-large, or (b) to a targeted class of beneficiaries, where (i) the class is disadvantaged relative to the population as a whole, or (ii) there is a significant value to the community in providing special benefits to the targeted class; and (iii) the NPO provides significant goods and services at or below cost. (Simon & Irish, 2004, p. 17)

Notice that the members of the organization are not considered an important target in this case. Another example requirement is: "The operational expense ratio for charitable activities as opposed to non-charitable activities should be expected to be over 50% of the total expenses incurred in a year" (Miyakawa, 2006, p. 64), which would mean that "more than half of the activities must not be services or funds for the benefit of members" (Ogawa, 2004, p. 48). These requirements have had a significant impact on the self-help group landscape in Japan. According to a 2012 Cabinet Office survey (Naikakufu, 2013), 40% of Associations had decided to become Public Benefit Corporations or planned to; 45% had decided to become General Non-Profit Corporations or planned to; and the remaining 15% had decided to dissolve or pursue other options.

Some self-help organizations found the decision-making process difficult. For example, Zendanren, the largest national association of self-help groups for alcoholics (Danshukai groups), decided to become a Public Benefit Corporation for two reasons. First, they wanted to keep their tax-exempt status, and second, they believed their organization was for public benefit (Zendanren, 2008, p. 2). As expressed in their "Abstinence Pledge," Zendanren considers it their mission to "commend the delight of abstinence to people who suffer from alcoholism" (Chenhall & Oka, 2009, p. 121). If they did not secure the legal status of a Public Benefit Corporation, their voluntary service might face unexpected difficulties. For example, their activities might be considered for members only, not for the public, and consequently it would be harder for them to obtain the cooperation of related professional organizations. After becoming a Public Benefit Corporation,

Zendanren had to ask members for larger membership fees in order to conduct more charitable activities; this increase is no doubt one reason for the decreasing membership of Zendanren (Oka, 2013a). On the other hand, the requirements for gaining charitable status could prove a great motivator for Zendanren to confirm their original for-public-benefit mission and become more helpful to people who have not yet discovered their existence.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have traced the historical development of self-help groups in Japan, and described the current issues between self-help groups and supporting professionals in civil society. Japanese self-help groups can provide very interesting material for cross-cultural research. Further research could be conducted on Japanese self-help groups in relation to the following questions: If Christianity played a role in the development of self-help groups in the West as modeled by 12-Step Groups, how has Buddhism influenced self-help groups in Japan? Numerous self-help groups in Japan have adopted models from Western—especially American—groups: how were the ideas conveyed? How did the original concepts change or perpetuate within the indigenous Japanese culture? How different is the relationship between self-help groups and professionals in Japan from that in other countries? Has the 2006 new legal framework hindered or helped the establishment of new self-help groups? Are self-help groups thriving or declining by fulfilling the requirements for various forms of legal status? Does charitable status help self-help groups develop their social activities and lead to greater public acknowledgment, or does it make them less attractive because people might feel that once they join the organization they would have to work not for themselves, but for strangers, as charity staff do?

By conducting comprehensive studies on plants growing in various environments, from the tropics to the polar regions, botanists have been able to reveal their innermost workings. Likewise, scholars of self-help groups should explore the potential and possibilities of self-help groups around the world by taking into account their unique historical, cultural, and political situations. If we are to meaningfully increase the effectiveness of self-help groups overall, those existing outside of Western countries need to be researched further.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Tomofumi Oka
Department of Social Services
Sophia University
7-1, Kioi-cho, Chiyoda-ku
Tokyo 102-8554
Japan
e-mail: t-oka@sophia.ac.jp