Research Papers

GROUP FORMATION, PARTICIPANT RETENTION, AND GROUP DISBANDMENT IN A MEN'S MUTUAL HELP ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Representatives of an international men's peer-led mutual help organization were surveyed to determine rates of group formation and disbandment, rates of individual participation and retention, and factors associated with long lasting and effective groups. From 1990 to 1998, the organization's center gained a net of about 3 groups and 22 members per year. Median survival time of groups was estimated to be 4½ years. Over 60% of the groups disbanded within 3 years of formation. Groups perceived to be more effective and that were initiated early in the history of the organization were much less likely to disband. Members most commonly dropped out of a group because of time conflicts and difficulty traveling to meetings. Older members were less likely to drop out of a group. Implications of the findings for the survival and development of mutual help groups and organizations are discussed.

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Indicators of socialization and quality of life show men to be especially prone to violence, alcohol and drug addiction, incarceration, early mortality, heart disease, suicide, perpetration of domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse of children, abandonment of parental responsibilities, and poor school performance (e.g., Jack & Griffith, 2013; Kilmartin, 2009; Lee & Owens, 2002). In the last 25 years, a social movement of men has emerged that has focused on the dysfunctional aspects of masculine behavior and male gender roles as the cause of these health and behavioral risks (Courtenay, 2000; Melluish & Bulmer, 1999; Miller & Bell, 1996).

SELF-HELP ORGANIZATIONAL AND GROUP CHARACTERISTICS OF MKP

Small, peer-led mutual help groups of men may be a unique and effective way for men to address their needs, roles, and developmental challenges (Guarnaschelli, 1994; Jesser, 1996; Schwalbe, 1996). A number of such groups that focus on gendered aspects of men's experiences and problems in living have been formed in many localities, some with larger organizational structures to support their effectiveness and to expand their availability to larger numbers of men (Mankowski & Silvergleid, 1999-2000; Redden & Sonn, 2003). The group format may be an engaging structure for many men, different than individual therapy or counseling (Roy, Gourde, & Couto, 2011). An early wave of research included mostly anecdotal accounts describing ways in which these peer-led self-help groups and organizations are perceived as beneficial by participants (Benson, 1981; Blake, Brown, Fairbairns, Shephard, Spiegelhalter, Steckelmacher, et al., 1992; Schwalbe, 1996, pp. 15-17). More recently, several evaluations of one peer-led men's mutual help organization, the Mankind Project (MKP), have indicated that participation is associated with reduced gender role conflict and increased well being (Anderson, Maton, Burke, Mankowski, & Stapleton, 2014; Burke, Maton, Mankowski, & Anderson, 2010; Maton, Mankowski, Anderson, Barton, Karp, & Ratjen, 2014).

The MKP is an organization that offers self-help groups (Integration groups; "I-Groups") and activities (the New Warrior Training Adventure [NWTA], a weekend initiation retreat) to support men's development, based on archetypal theories of male personality development (Moore & Gillette, 1990). The organization shares many similar characteristics with but also some differences from typical self-help and mutual aid organizations and groups (Borkman, 2008). A high percentage of MKP participants are also involved in other self-help groups (Anderson et al., 2014). Men engaged in redefining masculinity are often aided by participation in 12-step self-help groups (e.g., Irvine & Klocke, 2001). MKP I-Groups are closed, peer-facilitated groups. I-Groups typically meet on a weekly basis and are free to attend, similar to other mutual help groups. There is, however, a significant fee ($600-$700) charged to participants for the initial weekend-long

initiation retreat that introduces men to the organization, though financial aid is available for men who are unable to pay. The fees are used mainly to provide stipends to long-term members who lead the weekend retreats and the first 8 weeks of I-Group meetings. Self-help groups and I-Groups also differ in that self-help groups are typically based on a principle of mutual aid among co-equal peers, whereas the ethic of I-Groups also includes the ethic of mentoring and eldering, which may connote some degree of hierarchy or difference in men's experience and knowledge.

While a small body of research indicates the benefits of participation in peer-led men's mutual help groups, little is known about the growth dynamics of these groups and organizations and whether certain characteristics of the groups lead to successful outcomes, such as members' continued participation and the survival of the groups over time. In his study of mutual help group dynamics, Maton (1993) provides a useful ecological conceptualization of mutual help at three levels of analysis: the mutual help organization, the mutual help group, and the individual participants. Information at all three levels of analysis may be useful in understanding how isolated groups develop and possibly expand in number to become more widespread, accessible resources for promoting well-being (see Zimmerman, Reischl, Seidman, Rappaport, Toro, & Salem, 1991).

Data on the organization (e.g., number of years of existence) and characteristics of groups (e.g., meeting frequency, location of meetings) and individual members (e.g., age) each might help explain the duration of the groups' existence. For example, Maton, Leventhal, Madera, & Julien (1989) studied a representative sample of mutual help groups and found that several factors predicted the length of time that groups survived beyond their formation stage, including affiliation with a national organization, professional involvement, and the kind of problem in living that was addressed by the group. Examining the final stage of group development, Wituk, Shepherd, Warren, and Meissen (2002) found that the most common reasons why groups disbanded were (in decreasing prevalence) attendance problems (76%), changes or problems in leadership (52%), the group was no longer needed (35%), problems between members (31%), and logistical problems (31%). Zimmerman et al. (1991) reported exponential growth in mutual help group formation in the GROW organization, mostly in the 6th and 7th years after the organization began in the U.S. state of Illinois. At the same time, about 27% of the groups that formed over a 7-year period eventually disbanded due to lack of sufficient membership. Examining records from more than 900 groups in the United Kingdom, Chaudhary, Avis, and Munn-Giddings (2010) found survival rates that were generally consistent across different kinds of mutual help groups. And, similar to the findings of Wituk et al., the most commonly cited factors for groups closing in Chaudhary et al.'s study were the departure of a "key" member and declining membership. In a comprehensive analysis of mutual help organizations, Archibald (2008) tapped a number of databases to examine institutional level influences on organization formation in the United States from

1955-2000 and found complex and opposing relationships between professional influence, state support, and rates of formation.

A number of factors have been theorized to contribute to group survival, effective functioning, and individual retention among men's peer-led mutual help groups. For example, the quality of group leadership, features of the group process, the group size, its frequency and regularity of meetings, the regularity of members' attendance, diversity in members' age and other characteristics, and the availability of a stable meeting location have been discussed (Jesser, 1996, pp. 111-125; Kauth, 1992; Taylor, 1995). Specifically, successful closed groups (i.e., stable and effective) are believed to meet relatively frequently (e.g., two to four times a month), in an environment that is accessible, free of distraction, and not too small or too large (e.g., four to eight men), have members who attend regularly, and have a clear policy for missed attendance. These factors might contribute to group effectiveness and duration by helping to create a sense of community in groups (Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002), in which commitment, intimacy, and trust can flourish and deepen.

In addition to identifying the factors related to successful group formation and maintenance and individual members' retention, we need knowledge about why group members drop out of their group and why groups disband. Group disbandment and individual dropouts could represent the failure of the group to meet participants' needs. On the other hand, these events may be necessary, even healthy, aspects of group growth and life-cycle dynamics (Keyton, 1993). Once their needs are met, men may no longer be as engaged in the group and thus make less positive contributions. Of course, where the group's problem or concern is understood to be an incurable disease (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous), drop outs cannot be viewed in this same way. In other contexts, however, it may be healthy for an individual member and the group to acknowledge a member's growth and change, and then for the member to leave the group, or for the group collectively to disband. For example, men might join a peer-led mutual help group to learn how to develop greater intimacy in their relationships with other men. Having achieved this both in the group and in their outside relationships, men might decide to leave the group. On the other hand, other members might leave a peer-led men's mutual help group because of disagreements or unresolved conflicts with group members, or not feeling supported or safe or having one's needs met. An understanding of the reasons why members leave men's groups could inform the development of guidelines for the process, content, and structure of groups (e.g., Jesser, 1996; Kauth, 1992; Taylor, 1995), which would be useful to mutual help organizations and clearinghouses.

CURRENT STUDY

We had four specific purposes for conducting this study. The first was to determine how long members participate in their peer-led men's mutual help group: Is participation short lived, or does it rather become an ongoing part of men's lives?

A second purpose was to determine the reasons why members leave their groups: Do the needs that originally motivate participation become fulfilled or do groups no longer meet participants' original or current needs? Third, we sought to determine how long peer-led men's support groups survive: Is the duration short lived or do groups meet over a long period of time? And, do groups disband when individual members leave them or rather continue meeting successfully, either without additional, new members or by merging with another I-Group? Finally, we aimed to determine whether individual-level factors (e.g., members' age) and group-level factors (e.g., frequency of meeting, meeting location) are associated with groups' longevity over time and their perceived effectiveness. Given the generally descriptive purposes of the study, we had no specific hypotheses about the relationship between the member and group characteristics and the group outcomes (i.e., group survival, longevity, perceived effectiveness).

METHOD

Participants

Research participants were representatives of all ManKind Project Greater Washington, DC (MKP-GW) I-Groups formed between 1990 and 1998 ($n = 45$). Two additional groups began to form but never met after the 8-week facilitation training period. Because this study was focused on factors determining group durability and perceived effectiveness after the training weekend and facilitation, these groups were removed from all analyses. One representative from each currently active ($N = 23$) and disbanded ($N = 22$) I-Group was recruited to report on his group for this study. Groups were counted as disbanded if members had stopped meeting or if members had merged into another larger group. For active groups, the representative was in most, but not all cases, the official, group-designated liaison between the I-Group and the larger MKP Greater Washington organization. For disbanded groups, the representative was someone who could be contacted and was knowledgeable about the group history. Based on the representatives' reports about all members of their I-Group since its formation, a total of 529 individual group members were identified as having participated in an MKP-GW I-Group. In total, 295 participants had dropped out of their I-Group, and 221 were still active in a MKP I-Group as of 1998. The start and/or end dates for the remaining 13 members was not known by the representative and therefore these men were not included in the analysis. The average reported age of members was 42.3 years (ranged from 16 to 79).

Research Context: The Mankind Project (MKP)

The MKP's mission statement describes the international organization as "An order of men called to reclaim the sacred masculine for our time through initiation, training, and action in the world." Participation in the MKP begins with the NWTA, an intense, weekend-long program. After this program, most

men voluntarily participate in an ongoing Integration group (I-Group) with the other men who attended the weekend program, designed to support the men's integration of the weekend training and experience into their daily lives. These groups are led by 1-2 trained peer facilitators from the MKP organization for their first eight weekly meetings. The facilitator is a highly experienced volunteer member of MKP who then receives additional mentorship and training from other MKP staff on leadership that prepares him to facilitate the I-Groups. The goal of the I-Groups is to help the men integrate the weekend training into their daily lives (see Kauth, 1992). Following the staff-led 8-week facilitation Integration period, the group becomes entirely peer-led by the regular members themselves, and continues meeting for as long as the members continue to participate.

Procedure

Our research team was purposefully composed of both members and non-members of the MKP organization. Members were helpful in gaining access to and establishing enduring relationships with I-Group representatives who reported on their I-Groups. The team also includes several non-members, who add different, potentially more objective interpretations of the data. Together, the team was able to engage members of the organization as co-participants in the research process and in disseminating and implementing the findings.

Based on records obtained from the MKP organization, group representatives were located and mailed an I-Group Historical Survey in 1996 and 1998. Representatives were given approximately 2 weeks to complete and return the survey by mail. If after this time they had not completed the survey, the representative was called by one of the authors from UMBC, and the survey was administered over the telephone. Following this procedure, a 100% participation rate was attained (some data were missing for particular survey items; this is noted where applicable in the results). The representatives were encouraged to get input from other members in the group before completing the survey. Information was also cross-checked with MKP-GW's organizational records, where they existed, to verify accuracy of the data provided by the group representatives. The survey had two parts—a set of questions about the I-Group and a set of questions about the individual members of the I-Group.

Survey Questions about I-Groups

The first section of the survey asked the representative to report when the I-Group started and (if applicable) stopped meeting. In addition, the following information was requested for each year that the I-Group met since its formation: the frequency of meeting (every week or every other week), the meeting location (a group was defined as having a *stable location* if it met in the same location every year; otherwise, it had a *varied location*), the average number

of members who attended a typical meeting, and the group's perceived effectiveness, rated on a 10-point Likert scale from 1 (not effective) to 10 (very effective). Unless otherwise reported, analyses were conducted using the I-Group's score on a variable averaged over the years that the I-Group had met.

Survey Questions about I-Group Members

Next, the survey asked the representative to list each member in his I-Group and for each member to report the man's age, the date when he joined and (if applicable) left the I-Group, and the reason(s) why he left the I-Group. The following reasons for leaving the group were listed as response options: (1) moved, (2) work too busy, (3) family life too busy, (4) disagreement with the group, (5) disagreement with an individual in the group, (6) disagreement with MKP-GW, (7) just stopped going, (8) got what he wanted from the group, and (9) "unknown." Instructions indicated that multiple reasons could be checked for each member and space was provided for adding additional reasons not specified in the list.

Analysis

Survival analysis can be used to determine the timing and patterns of events and their predictors (Luke, 1993; Singer & Willett, 1991). We used survival analysis to model the time from joining MKP to I-Group drop out, the time from I-Group formation to disbandment, and group-level predictors of these events. Survival analysis has several advantages over regression models, including most importantly that it allows use of both censored and uncensored cases. Censoring occurs when the time frame of the data collection is completed before all cases have experienced the event. For instance, in the present study, groups that had not disbanded by the end of data collection were censored cases. In such cases, researchers usually have the option of dropping those cases from the analyses, or using the current average duration of the group (regardless of whether the group lasts longer than the data collection time), or using the censored outcomes as a categorical predictor of another outcome that varies over time. However, each of these procedures has a propensity to result in an underestimate of the actual duration, causing a loss and/or distortion of information. For instance, simply using the average duration time of the groups that did not disband would lead to an underestimate of group duration if, for example, data collection only lasted 2 years instead of 8 years.

In the group level analyses, the survival function estimates the likelihood that a randomly selected group will not disband before each time interval, until every group disbands or the data collection ends, whichever happens first. The survival probability always starts out at 1.00 and then decreases over time. This is because when data collection begins, by definition, no group has disbanded yet. The survival function describes how many months pass before the average

group disbands. As time passes more groups disband and the survival function decreases. For the individual participation survival analysis, the survival function estimates the likelihood that a randomly selected person will not leave the group before each time interval, until every person drops out or the data collection ends, whichever happens first.

RESULTS

I-Groups

Rates of I-Group Formation and Disbandment

First, we analyzed patterns of growth and characteristics of the I-Groups during the initial years of the Center's history. The first MKP-GW I-Group was formed in 1990. Over the following 8 years, there was an average increase of 3.2 groups per year. This net gain resulted from two opposing trends: an average of 5.6 new groups forming per year, offset by about three (2.4) pre-existing groups disbanding per year (see Figure 1). The rates of group formation and especially disbanding increased over the years, resulting in rapid initial growth that leveled off somewhat in later years.
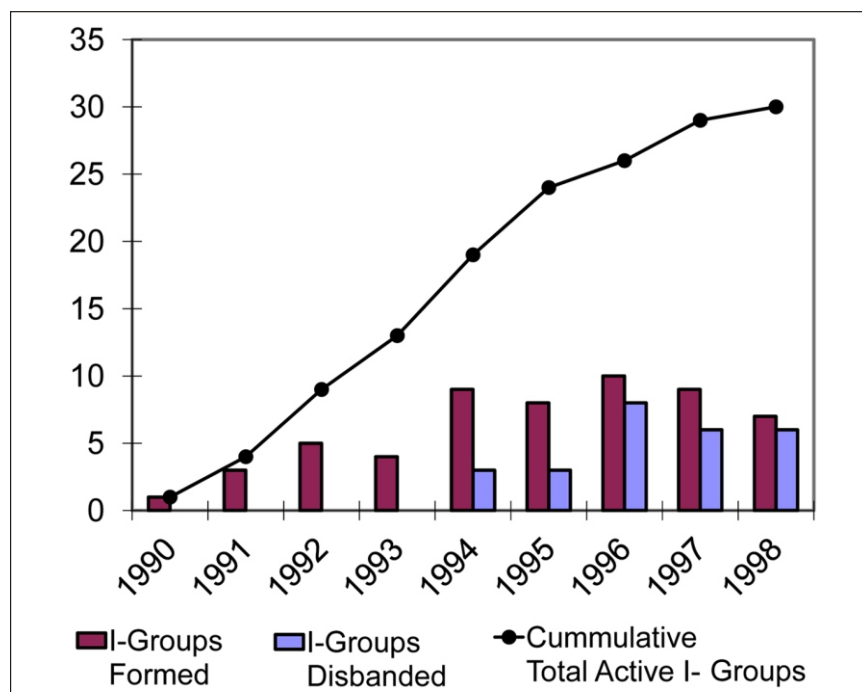

Figure 1. Number of groups forming and disbanding (1990-1998).

Almost half of the groups that formed later disbanded during the 8-year observational period. Of the 45 groups that formed, 22 had disbanded and 23 remained active (groups that did not disband during data collection). Active groups had been meeting for an average of about 3½ years ($M = 42.5$ months; $SD = 24.7$ months), with 17 (70%) of them meeting for at least 2 years. Only 9 of the 22 (37%) disbanded groups met this long ($M = 21.0$ months; $SD = 17.9$ months).

Survival analysis was used to estimate the probability of a group disbanding at a given time. All baseline survival and hazard information was attained by using the Kaplan-Meier method. The group survival curve (see Figure 2) shows the proportion of groups still meeting from 0 to 88 months (the longest number of months a group survived through the end of data collection). The median survival time of groups was 4½ years.

I-Group Characteristics

Groups met in a variety of settings including homes, churches, office buildings and schools. On any given year, about 54% of the groups met in homes, 25% in churches, 9% in office buildings or schools, and 10% varied between these
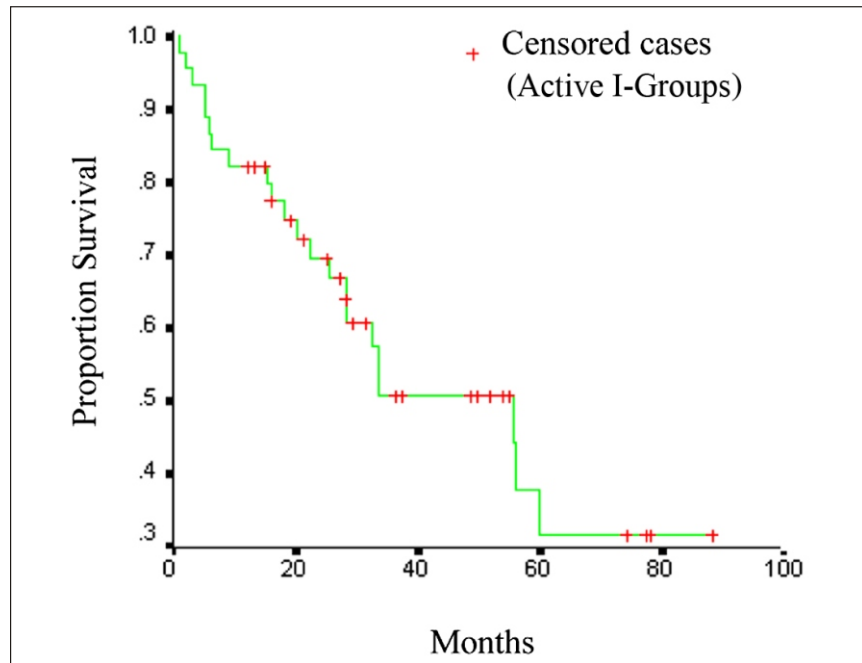

Figure 2. I-Group survival.

locations, and this varied little over time. At the beginning of their history, groups most commonly met once per week. However, the proportion of groups that met weekly as compared to bi-weekly generally declined over time. Specifically, in their first year, 84% of groups met every week and 13% met every other week. The percentage of groups that met weekly fell to 50% in the second year, 53% in the third, 46% in the fourth, and only 38% in the fifth year. Groups were formed with an average of 6.1 members; averaged across the years of a group's existence, most members continued attending the group meetings on a regular basis ($M = 5.7$, $SD = 1.1$). Group representatives perceived their groups as moderately effective ($M = 6.9$, $SD = 1.8$).

Predictors of Group Duration, Disbandment,
and Perceived Effectiveness

Next, we examined whether the group characteristics (i.e., stability of meeting location, meeting frequency, group attendance) predict perceived effectiveness, and whether perceived effectiveness differed between active and disbanded groups. Only group location was related to perceived group effectiveness; specifically, groups which met in a stable location during the first year were perceived as more effective (averaged over the years) than those whose location varied during the first year ($M = 7.6$ vs. 6.3), $t(43) = 2.66$, $p < .05$. Attendance per meeting and frequency of meeting were not significantly related to perceived effectiveness. Finally, we analyzed whether perceived effectiveness was related to group survival. Active groups were rated as more effective, on average across years, than disbanded groups ($M = 7.6$ vs. 6.2), $t(43) = 2.78$, $p < .05$.

Next, Cox proportional hazards analysis was used to determine whether group characteristics and perceived effectiveness predict group status. Only one variable, perceived group effectiveness, significantly predicted the probability of group disbandment. Groups with better than average perceived effectiveness ratings over time were less likely to disband than groups with lower average effectiveness ratings, such that for each unit of positive change in perceived group effectiveness, the probability that a group disbanded was reduced by 35% ($1 - .65 = .35$).

Finally, based on examination of the group survival data, we conducted a post-hoc analysis to determine if groups initiated early in the history of the organization were less likely to disband than groups that were initiated in more recent years; when comparing groups that formed early in the history of the organization (between 1990-1994) to groups that formed later (between 1995-1998), the probability that a group disbanded increased by 388% ($1 - 4.88 = 3.88$). Among groups initiated in 1990-1994, 95% (19 of 20) continued 2 years or longer whereas 72% (18 of 25) of the groups developed between 1995 and 1998 disbanded within 2 years or less, $\chi^2(1) = 20.45$, $p = .001$.

Individual Members

Rates of Joining and Dropping Out of I-Groups

On average, over the 8-year period from 1990-1998, the number of men involved in an I-Group increased by 22 each year (see Figure 3). This net gain in participants resulted from two opposing trends: an average of more than 59 men forming new I-Groups or joining existing I-Groups per year, offset by about 37 men leaving I-Groups per year. As at the group level, rapid initial growth in participation leveled off in later years of the organization's existence.

Survival analysis shows that the median duration of individual members participating in a given group was just over 2 years (median = 26.4 months, M = 24.0 months; range 1 to 88 months, SD = 21.3 months) (see Figure 4 for the survival curve). As shown in the bottom half of Table 1, active members participated longer (M = 36.3 months) than those who had left an I-Group (14.3 months), $t(490)$ = 13.22, $p < .001$. Among currently active men in 1998, 60% had been involved 2 or more years, whereas only 20% of men who dropped out of their group were involved that long. Men who left their group participated for an average of about 1 year (M = 13 months), whereas men who were still active in
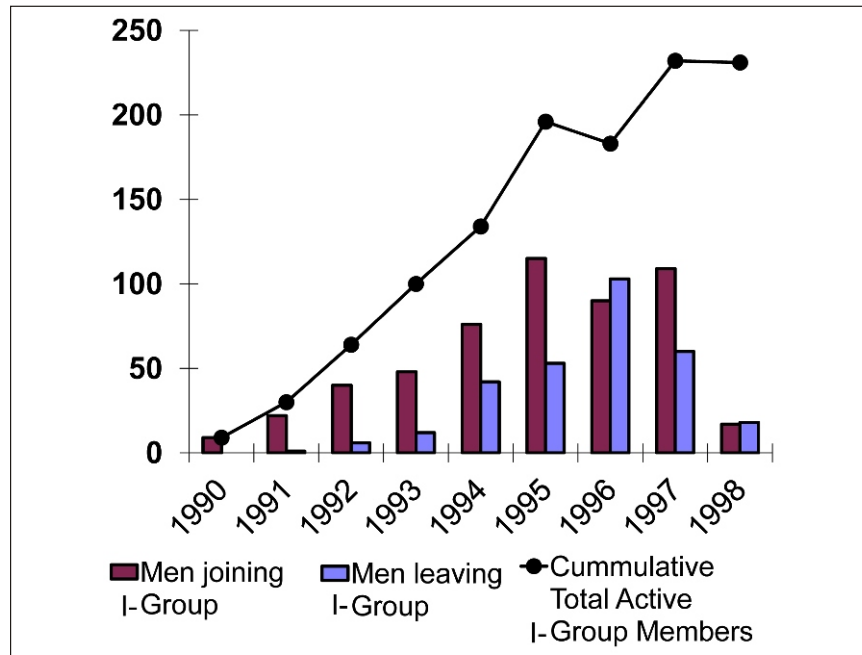

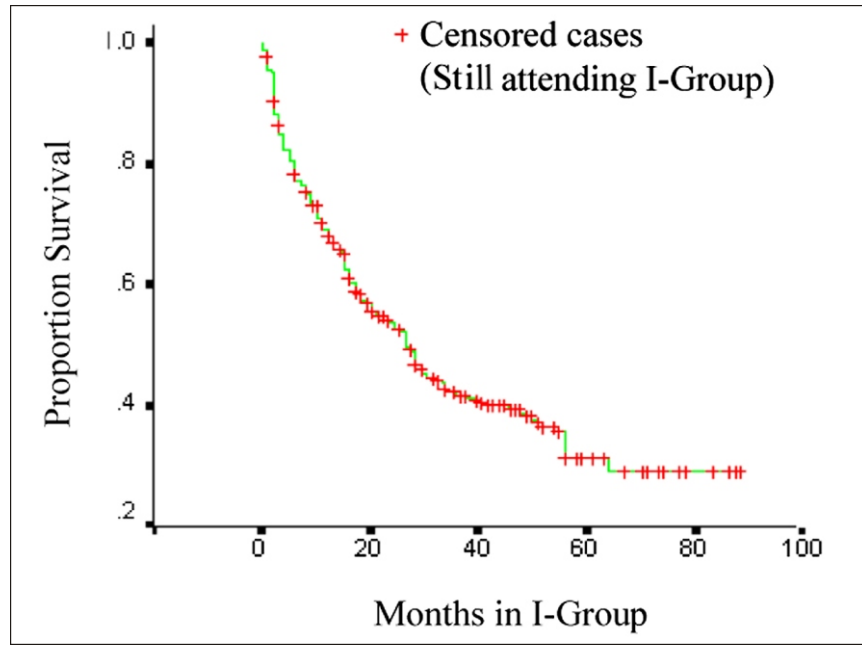Figure 3. Number of individuals joining and leaving I-Groups (1990-1998).

Figure 4. Individual participation.

Table 1. I-Group and Individual Member Characteristics
as a Function of Status

I-Group characteristic	Active groups			Disbanded groups			
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	p
Duration (months)	42.5	(24.7)	23	22.0	(17.9)	22	*
Stable location[a]	1.2	(0.39)	23	1.3	(.46)	22	
Frequency of meeting[b]	1.2	(0.43)	23	1.3	(.41)	22	
Attendance per meeting	5.9	(1.41)	23	5.6	(1.4)	21	
Perceived effectiveness	7.6	(1.26)	23	6.2	(1.96)	22	*

Individual member characteristics	Active members			Members who dropped out			
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	p
Participation (months)	36.3	(22.50)	219	14.3	(13.89)	276	***
Age	44.5	(9.58)	219	40.4	(10.74)	276	***

[a](1 = stable, 2 = varied); [b](1 = every week, 2 = every other week).
*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

their groups had been attending for 3 years (M = 36 months). The survival plot also shows that the dropout rate for individual members declined more steadily than the rate at which groups disbanded. By the fifth year, this decline had almost completely stabilized through the end of data collection, meaning that "old timers" were relatively stable in their group commitments.

Predictors of Participation

Active members were older (M = 44.5) than members who had left their I-Group (M = 40.4 years), $t(349)$ = 4.9, p < .001. Results of a Cox proportional hazards analysis showed that age significantly predicted individual participation in the groups. Older members were less likely to leave a group, such that for every year of increase in age, members were 4% more likely to stay in the stay in the group (1-.9584).

Reasons for Dropping Out of an I-Group

Group members discontinued participation in I-Groups for a variety of reasons. Of the 277 members who left a group about whom we had data, 23% left due to distance/transportation problems, 22% were reported to have left because work, family, or school was too busy, 15% of the men left because their group disbanded, 13% left for reasons unknown to the group representative, 12% because of disagreements with the group, individual members of the group, or with the MKP organization, 7% left because they got what they wanted from the group, 6% moved to another group, and another 3% left for other reasons. It should be noted that these figures include men whose group disbanded and therefore may not have voluntarily left the group.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study inform our understanding of mutual help group and organizational growth dynamics and suggest strategies for maintaining and expanding these organizations (Archibald, 2008; Chaudhary et al., 2010; Zimmerman et al., 1991). The overall portrait of MKP-GW I-Groups painted by these data suggests that groups are fairly long lasting (median survival was estimated at 4½ years), perceived as moderately to highly effective and, until recently, rapidly increasing in number (cf. Maton et al., 1989). About 50% of the 45 groups that formed over an 8-year period have disbanded. Although the disbanded MKP groups lasted for a shorter period of time than continuing groups, 9 of the 22 disbanded groups did last over 2 years. The survival rate of MKP-GW I-Groups can be compared to those reported in other studies of mutual help groups and organizations. For example, Chaudhary, Avis, and Munn-Gunding (2010) found that about half (45%; n = 421) of U.K. mutual help groups met for at least 1 year before closing, and about 40% of these "established" groups continued meeting for at least 7 years. The rate of formation of new I-Groups

in MKP-GW metropolitan region over the first 8 years of the organization was about half that reported for GROW mutual help groups across the entire state of Illinois during the first 7 years of its existence (5.6 vs. 10 per year) (Zimmerman et al., 1991).

MKP-GW I-Groups that started more recently lasted for a shorter time than those in earlier years. Similarly, men who joined an I-Group in the earliest years of MKP were more likely to stay involved in a group for 2 years or more than men who joined later. The reason for these cohort effects on organizational growth is unclear, though one explanation comes from diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1995), which addresses how new ideas and practices are adopted in a population, including differences between "innovators" and "late adopters." Groups formed earlier may have been comprised of particularly innovative men who had prior experience and/or especially strong initiative, motivation, and dedication to men's peer mutual help groups, compared to the majority of men who began participating later, perhaps only after such groups were relatively well known in their social networks. Alternatively, the expanded size, structure, and functions of MKP may have decreased more recent member's identification with and commitment to the organization. A larger organization may be less successful in sustaining a sense of community characterized by identification, belonging, and commitment. Additional research is necessary to examine these and other possible explanations, and especially to see whether these trends occur in other MKP centers, and whether they represent a temporary or long-term change in and challenge to the organization.

Most groups met weekly during the first year, but less frequently over time. When interpreting the negative association between meeting frequency and historical time, it is important to remember that groups met more frequently during their first year and that most disbanded I-Groups lasted a shorter duration than currently active groups. Taken together, these data do not suggest that meeting less frequently leads to longer lasting groups, but rather that disbanded groups are disproportionately represented in the earlier years of group existence, a time when groups are meeting more frequently.

Groups met in a variety of places including homes, churches, office buildings, and schools. Having an unstable group location was related negatively to perceived group effectiveness. Without the stability of a regular meeting place, groups appear to be less effective. This may be due, in part, to the deep personal work which occurs in MKP I-Groups and which may best occur in a "safe container" (Mankowski, 2000; Schwalbe, 1996) that provides continuity and security.

Currently active group participants have been involved in their groups for about 3 years, whereas members who dropped out did so, on average, shortly after 1 year of joining. This level of retention is considerably higher than has been reported for some other kinds of mutual help groups (cf. Luke et al., 1993). These and other data (Luke et al., 1993) also suggest that dropouts are most likely during the first year of participation in a mutual help group. The number of new men joining MKP-GW I-Groups each year has generally

exceeded the number dropping out, although beginning in 1996 the numbers appeared to reach a plateau. Whether the net growth continues to decrease over time remains to be determined.

Members cited varied reasons for leaving I-Groups, which provide several possible avenues for increasing member retention (cf. Wituk et al., 2002). Commonly, members left because they were too busy with other commitments including work, school, and family. While not discounting the importance of conflicting commitments, the effects of pressure to compete, achieve, and perform that is part of the traditional masculine gender role (O'Neil, 2008; Pleck, 1995) may prevent men from continued participation in peer led support groups like those offered in MKP. Indeed, continued participation in MKP might assist these men in making changes at the personal and societal level that would alleviate pressure to be overly competitive and achievement-oriented in the first place. MKP could address this issue by placing greater emphasis on the importance of sustained I-Group involvement in its training program.

An equally common reason for leaving a group was difficulty getting to the group meeting location. It may be necessary for the MKP organization to develop more groups in more locations to accommodate and retain these members. Between 1985 when MKP was founded and 1998, 23 training centers were formed (Virgin, 1998); since that time, the organization has continued to grow, with an increase from 23 to 38 chapters in the following 6 years. However, many MKP centers are concentrated in large, urban areas that are less accessible to men in rural locations. These men may have a more difficult time establishing a critical mass of men who have completed the New Warrior Training Adventure with whom they could form an ongoing I-Group. Further research needs to investigate whether there are deeper underlying problems within the groups that the men who are leaving do not feel comfortable enough to identify. For instance, group members may not feel that they are getting what they wanted from the group, but may not feel safe enough to discuss the issue in their group.

The results suggest that many members leave as a result of disagreements with the group, specific members in the group, or with the MKP organization. To address this situation, peer facilitators might pay more attention to managing conflict within the groups, and to nurturing each man's sense of "safety" in the group. Findings from interviews with group representatives that were previously reported (Mankowski, Maton, Burke, Hoover, & Anderson, 2000), showed that the ability of groups to stick to an agreed upon procedure for holding members accountable for their feelings and actions, and the presence of key members who can manage conflicts contribute to perceived group effectiveness and stability.

Other findings also bear implications for group development and duration. The importance of a stable meeting location during the first year suggests that MKP should consider further assisting new groups to find a suitable meeting place. Given the importance of the early years of a group, MKP should also consider asking the original peer facilitators of the group to periodically consult

with the group about early signs of loss of focus, accountability, or conflict resolution and management. Finally, although the optimal mix of characteristics such as intense interpersonal engagement, age, common bonds, and chemistry among members may be difficult to arrange, some attention to the mix of personal characteristics among members may be called for, when feasible. Different types of I-Groups and alternative models for I-Group development may also be worth considering. For example, new members could join effective, existing groups with openings. Open I-Groups could be used so that a man has an existing I-Group to return to after he does the NWTA. I-Groups could be formed which go beyond emotional work to focus on the development of life mission for members who have been in a group several years. Specialized groups for men with shared interests or experiences (e.g., young fathers, widowers, gay men) could be started.

Finally, it may beneficial to ensure that the group's peer facilitator during the integration process is someone who is energetic and charismatic in order to keep the energy level in the integration process high and flowing. According to the I-Group representatives, the men are not looking for professional therapists, but men who can guide them and also be one of them. Additionally, it may be worthwhile to engage the groups in more activities with the organization to help the men keep a perspective on the work that they are doing and their own goals for joining. The combination of energetic and charismatic members, some experienced members in the I-Group, along with semi-frequent contact with leaders of the group's initial weekend training and/or the I-Group's peer facilitators may contribute to increased retention of groups and group members.

One of the most important findings in this study is that changes in MKP-GW's organizational attributes, such as its size and growth rate, may be related to the durability and perceived effectiveness of I-Groups. Research on organizational growth has consistently shown a direct relationship between change in an organization's size and an accompanying change in the organization's structure and context (Archibald, 2008; Hannan & Freeman, 1989). For example, as the size of an organization increases, less contact occurs between the founders of the organization and newer members of the organization. This may be due to the different levels of the organizational personnel that emerge. Additionally, research shows that organizations are dependent on the environments around them (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976). MKP's growth and the resulting size of the organization could have affected the quality with which new groups were formed as well as altering some of the initial values, mix of personalities, and other overall subtle characteristics of the original organization. This also may explain why many of the newer groups are not lasting as long as the original ones.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Some limitations of the study deserve comment. First, the information about the I-Groups and participants came from a single representative of the group.

Although we encouraged the representatives to consult with other group members in completing the survey, this does not alleviate the concern that the information may not be truly representative of the group. Other members may have had different judgments about a group's effectiveness or about the reasons why certain members left the group. This issue is of greatest concern for disbanded groups because the representative may have found it particularly difficult to consult with men with whom he may not have been meeting for several years, and because the members of disbanded groups may be more likely to have diverse perceptions of the group's effectiveness.

In addition, these data do not allow us to differentiate retention rates based on *proactive* (e.g., dissatisfied with the group) versus *involuntary* (e.g., moving) reasons for leaving I-Groups. The correlates of retention are also likely to be different among proactive and involuntary drop outs. To address these limitations, future studies should collect information from all group members about perceptions of group effectiveness and relate them to reasons for leaving the group (both proactive and involuntary) and group disbanding.

A second limitation is that these data are retrospective and therefore subject to errors in recall. The memory of group representatives concerning how frequently their group met, how many members attended the meeting, and the dates that members joined and left the group may not have been completely accurate. Future research should follow groups prospectively, beginning at the time of their formation.

A third methodological issue in this study concerns the definition and meaning of group disbandment and mergers. Prior research indicates that members experience less intimacy and engagement in groups following a merger, especially those from the smaller of the two original groups (Wicker & Kauma, 1974). Several of the groups we defined as disbanded merged with another larger group which continued meeting. Although some members likely experienced these events either as a continuation of their group or the formation of a completely new group from two pre-existing groups, we considered the smaller group in the merger as disbanded. Analyses based on different definitions of group disbandment and merger might yield different overall findings. Future studies will need to consider how disbandment and mergers should be defined.

Another methodological challenge of studying mutual help organizations is how to conceptualize the birth and death of voluntary groups with fluid boundaries. For example, we removed two groups from our analysis that completed the 8-week Integration facilitation period but did not continue meeting afterwards (in one case the members merged with another group from their weekend training). An important question is whether the factors that lead to the failure of such groups are similar to or different from those factors that predict groups' disbandment at a later point in their history. Another question is whether the factors that lead to a group needing to merge are the same as those that lead to disbanding. Answers to such questions require larger samples of groups.

Finally, these results may not be applicable to other groups and organizations that are structured differently than the MKP, and have different purposes and organizational missions. For example, many men's groups have an "open" structure to their meetings in which men from the general public can attend any given meeting without making any commitment to return. We suspect that the relationships developed among men who attend such open groups are not as deep, and that their ability to challenge each other, and hold each other accountable for their feelings or actions is not as great. Generally, these groups are larger than "closed" groups and meet less frequently. The high level of organizational support and structure in MKP is likely to lead to groups that last longer and are more effective. Specifically, the weekend training program, 8-week group Integration facilitation after the weekend, ongoing opportunities for advanced trainings and workshops after the 8-week period, availability of an international network of members who can discuss group functioning and men's issues more generally, and other functions which are provided and coordinated by the Administrative Council of MKP may positively contribute to I-Group functioning.

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