

Self-help groups as a social resource in times of crisis

Raed Almateri¹

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Essay

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Abstract: The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of social support resources and the need to create and/or expand social networks that provide the necessary support. This has been evident as many people lost their sources of support in the most needed situations, including public support provided by formal institutions. Although the overall magnitude of the social impact is yet to be evaluated, many questions have been raised, as a result of this crisis, about improving the existing systems of support and using other possible social resources. This essay aims to shed light on the role of self-help groups (also called self-development or personal growth groups) as a significant resource of social support and resilience. Evidently, these groups have provided a space for people to connect with each other, to share useful information, to mutually give emotional and instrumental support, and to build capacity and resilience among its members. This has been more evident during the COVID-19 crisis as online self-help and mutual aid platforms played a key supportive role when movement was restricted. We argue that self-help groups represent an important social resource, not only as a buffer against crises, but also as tool for social change and improving quality of life.

Keywords: Self-help groups, social support, resilience, quality of life.

Los grupos de autoayuda como recurso social en tiempos de crisis

Resumen: La crisis del COVID-19 ha puesto de manifiesto la importancia de los recursos de apoyo social y la necesidad de crear y/o ampliar las redes sociales que proporcionen el apoyo necesario. Esto ha sido evidente ya que muchas personas perdieron sus fuentes de apoyo en las situaciones más necesitadas, incluido el apoyo público proporcionado por instituciones

¹ Candidate for Doctorate in Social Work. Email: rah@ucm.es

formales. Si bien aún no se ha evaluado la magnitud general del impacto social, se han planteado muchas preguntas como resultado de esta crisis, sobre la mejora de los sistemas de apoyo existentes y el uso de otros posibles recursos sociales. Este ensayo tiene como objetivo arrojar luz sobre el papel de los grupos de autoayuda (también llamados grupos de autodesarrollo o crecimiento personal) como un recurso importante de apoyo social y resiliencia. Evidentemente, estos grupos han proporcionado un espacio para que las personas se conecten entre sí, compartan información útil, se brinden apoyo emocional e instrumental mutuo, y desarrollen capacidad y resiliencia entre sus miembros. Esto ha sido más evidente durante la crisis de COVID-19, ya que las plataformas de autoayuda y ayuda mutua en línea desempeñaron un papel clave cuando se restringió el movimiento. Argumentamos que los grupos de autoayuda representan un recurso social importante, no solo como un amortiguador contra las crisis, sino también como una herramienta para el cambio social y la mejora de la calidad de vida.

Palabras claves: grupos de autoayuda, apoyo social, resiliencia, calidad de vida.

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 crisis, restrictions on movement and social interactions were imposed and many individuals found themselves in solitude without the support or services they used to have access to. This unprecedented situation has posed challenges at many levels and different ways. Specifically, health and social services suffered shortage or lack of resources, and the workers in these sectors have been faced with new questions.

One of these questions involves the issue of social resources that provide protection and support in adverse conditions, and enhance opportunities to cope and recover in the face or wake of crises and disasters. Obviously, this field of research is vast and to discuss all the types of social and support resources is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is worth shedding some light on what individuals can take advantage of in their social environment, especially when traditional and formal institutions fall short or fail to provide the necessary resources or support.

Generally, it is not uncommon that informal social and support resources evolve as a spontaneous response to crises, and to meet the needs that are not being met by governments and other formal organizations. One of these forms of solidarity and initiatives is what is called self-help groups (SHGs). In this essay, we will briefly review some theoretical aspects of these groups. This includes the concept and characteristics of SHGs, social support and resilience as relevant concepts, as well as some recent findings in the literature.

2. Theoretical argumentation

Studies in social work are developed around the generalist practice approach based on systems theory and ecosystems perspective. A key concept in this sense is the so-called Person-In-Environment (PIE), where we consider the various relationships and factors within the system impacting the individual and work to make that system or environment more healthy and supportive. Obviously, there are many different levels of environmental influences on the human experience, for the purpose of this essay we will focus on the group level.

2.1. SHGs: Concept and characteristics

The concept of self-help groups had its origin in the social movements challenging the authority of traditional institutions and of professionals, mainly in western industrialized countries during the 1960s and 1970s (Borkman, 2008). These groups have emerged as an alternative to provide social and emotional support to their members, which either were not available or have not been adequately provided by other means (Bumbalo & Young, 1973; Domenech, 1998).

The self-help groups have been developed in various fields such as health, education, microfinance, wellbeing, etc. with different terminology. In the literature, several terms have been used such as self-help (Katz & Brender, 1976; Borkman, 2004; 2008), self-development (Holm et al., 2010), self-improvement and personal growth (Young et al., 2013; Matsuo, 2019). Regardless of terminology and labels, the general purpose of these groups has been to improve aspects of life that formal systems and professionals fail to address or to provide the necessary support.

Among the various definitions of self-help groups, we highlight two definitions: one by Katz and Brender (1976) and the other by Borkman (2004). According to Katz and Brender, self-help groups are:

voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose. They are usually formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem, and bringing about desired social and/or personal change.... Self-help groups emphasize face-to-face social interactions and the assumption of personal responsibility by members. They often provide material assistance as well as emotional support; they are frequently "cause" oriented and promulgate an ideology or values through which members may attain an enhanced sense of personal identity. (Katz & Brender, 1976, p.9).

The second definition proposed by Borkman (2004) states that self-help groups are: "autonomous, voluntary assemblies of people in similar situations or predicaments, or with the same disease or condition, who join together to cope with and resolve their troublesome issue through sharing knowledge and providing mutual social and emotional support" (Borkman,

2004, p. 428). These definitions imply several relevant characteristics of self-help groups, which can be summarized as follows:

- **Autonomous and intentionally organized**
To distinguish them from the informal help provided by family, friends or neighbors, these groups are formed intentionally to achieve a goal or a set of goals; some are ad hoc and short-lived (Katz & Bender, 1976). Self-management and participation are emphasized rather than hierarchical governance, relying on member contributions of time, money, labor, etc.
- **Members share knowledge and experiences**
The knowledge shared in these groups is experience-based or as what Borkman (2008) call "experiential knowledge". Within the group, persons share information and stories based on experiences from their own lives, which can be of great help to others. The transmission of knowledge among personas in different stages of their recovery/growth is an important advantage of these groups.
- **Emotional support is a key component**
Emotional support is part of social support and refers to actions that show concern and make the person feel cared for, such as asking if someone is okay, showing respect for their needs, or simply listening to them (Drury et al., 2016). In this sense, self-help groups can be an important resource of emotional support for its members.
- **Social connectedness is perceived**
Social connectedness is defined as the subjective awareness of having close and constructive relationships with others (i.e., individuals, groups, and society), a perception that includes an internal sense of belonging (Lee and Robbins, 1998). While self-help groups can provide social support in difficult situations, social connectedness in itself -within these groups- is beneficial irrespective of whether one is under stress (Cohen, 2004).

In addition to these principal characteristics, self-help groups emphasize face-to-face social interactions as mentioned above in first the definition, although some authors argue that the perception of social connectedness may not necessarily involve direct interaction (Cacioppo et al., 2009; Holt-Lunstad, 2018). Online social activity can also be a potential important resource for social support and connectedness (Kent de Grey et al. 2019).

2.2. SHGs as a source for social support

Since the introduction of the term social support in the 1970s, there have been many definitions and theoretical discussions of this concept (Williams et al., 2004). However, in

general, social support is conceptualized as the social resources on which an individual can rely when dealing with life situations and stressors (Thoits, 1995). Essentially social support requires the existence of social relationships/networks through which the necessary support is received and perceived. In this sense, self-help groups can fulfill the most frequently mentioned functions of social support: emotional, informational and instrumental or material (Thoits, 2011).

- Emotional Support: involves the expression of caring, empathy, esteem and value, and encouragement.
- Informational Assistance: refers to advice giving, guidance, or providing information that may help a person solve a problem.
- Instrumental Support: refers to providing tangible materials such as money and physical objects or assistance with practical tasks or problems.

These functions can be performed in various forms as we engage in our daily activities and interact with families, friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc. However, in the context of self-help groups, these supportive actions become more intentional, visible and focused on improving the group member's situation or feelings. They can play an important role in the case of lack of support from family and close friends, or as a complementary resource to the individual's social network.

In the literature, numerous studies have shown that the participation in SHGs is linked with more social support, less psychological distress and negative emotions, better coping strategies and better quality of life (Borkman et al. 2020). Research also has shown that social support, especially perceived emotional support, directly and positively influences physical health and longevity as well as psychological well-being, both when individuals are and are not facing difficulties (Thoits, 2011).

2.3. Building resilience through SHGs

Another relevant concept to self-help groups is the concept of resilience. Regardless of discipline, resilience is generally defined as "a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity" (Grotberg, 1995). This definition assumes that persons, groups and communities have a recovering capacity and can access resources to counteract the negative effect of adversities.

According to Grotberg (1995), there are three sources of resilience features that can be described as "I AM", refers to inner strength; "I CAN", refers to social and interpersonal skills; and "I HAVE", refers to social support resources. An individual may have "all" or "some" of these sources, however, much of the earlier research on resilience was focused on identifying individual resources and traits of people, especially children (Palma-García & Hombrados-Mendieta, 2014). Thus, more attention was given to factors such as intelligence,

problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, motivation to succeed, faith and hope (Masten, 2015).

More recently, studies have begun to emphasize the importance of social environment, not only in early childhood, but also throughout the different phases of people's lives. Some resilience researchers are interested in the foundational social work concept of the person-in-environment (PIE) to draw a more holistic picture of resilience. Van Breda (2018), for example, argues that it is not possible to think about or research resilience without considering the supportive relationships as an essential component. Hartling (2008) supports the view that most of the resilience processes and protective factors are located within networks of social relationships with family, friends, school, colleagues and neighbourhoods.

In practice, self-help groups have been used as a method of building resilience in different contexts and fields. For example, in Western contexts, these groups are usually formed to address health-related issues, where in poor countries they are often created for economic reasons (Anderson et al., 2014). Thus, some groups may primarily seek to increase knowledge about health issues and to provide the necessary support to their members (i.e. women's health groups), while others are commonly used to alleviate poverty and to raise fund through contributions of group members (i.e. savings groups).

In recent years, studies have begun to investigate the relationship between participation in self-help groups and resilience, most of which focus on economic resources and neglect social and other factors such as structural inequality and social exclusion. For this reason, some researchers include the notion of resistance within the processes of resilience as means to reduce or eliminate structural obstacles (Bottrell, 2007; Ungar, 2011).

3. Conclusions

Self-help groups represent an important resource for social support in its various functional aspects; emotional, informational and instrumental. There is also evidence that they contribute positively in the resilience building processes and the general well-being of its members (Borkman et al. 2020). While some studies are more interested in the economic benefits of self-help groups, further research is needed to explore the psychological and social processes of these groups, especially in times of crises, and their potential role in adverse social contexts.

Social work, as a profession and discipline, is concerned with facilitating and contributing to change. This is clearly stated in the global definition of social work of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014), which says, "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people." We argue that, in addition to the social services provided by formal institutions, self-help groups can obviously

be an agency for change and empowerment. To enhance this possibility, favorable environments and conditions need to be created and facilitated to these groups.

In this direction, attempts have been made to incorporate self-help groups in the context of social intervention strategies. In Norway, for example, self-help groups are integrated into the health system and mostly relate to patient education programs and therapy groups led by professionals. However, this model has been criticized for being heavily regulated and depersonalized (Hedlund et al. 2019). This is understandable as the definitions of self-help groups found in the literature emphasize autonomy, voluntary and self-management characteristics. In addition, formal hierarchical structures imply some sort of power relations, therefore, it is worth considering the different influences that affect these groups and which interests are being served.

Overall, self-help groups are an important social resource in general and in times of crisis. A recent example is the initiative *Social Workers Helping Each Others* in Italy when groups of social workers created an online self-help and mutual aid platform to help its members stay resilient and mutually supportive during the COVID-19 crisis (Cabiati, 2021). We believe that self-help groups could tailor responses to diverse social conditions and offer a significant contribution to quality of life.

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