

WHAT DOES THE CONCEPT OF SELF-HELP MEAN TO THE ISRAELI POPULATION?

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Self-help organization is in its early stages of development in Israel. The purpose of the study described in this article is to deepen our understanding of a situation in which a concept that was developed within the context of one particular culture is transferred to a different culture. The most prevailing theme associated with the concept of self-help among the Israeli population was found to be problem solving regardless of any context, whether it be a group or individual, professional or non-professional. Participants also seemed to understand the concept in a literal way.

This article assesses the understanding of the concept of self-help among Israelis by exploring the meanings that individuals associate with self-help. Exploring what Israelis understand by the concept of self-help is of interest because it examines a concept within a cultural tradition that is quite different from the one in which it was developed. Such an exploration can also shed light on a recent debate voiced in the self-help literature regarding the definition of the concept.

Self-help has been variously defined in terms of individual efforts toward self-improvement, either within a political context or in relation to self-help mutual aid groups (Lavoie et al., 1994). It has been suggested (Riessman, 1992) that the term "self" in self-help can have several referents: It can refer to individuals involved in do-it-yourself projects or guided by self-help books, or to group participation in a social context with peers. Traditionally, scholars have predominantly emphasized one meaning of the term; that is, the mutual help component of self-help (Katz & Bender, 1976, 1990; Powell, 1987). Shapiro (1990), for example, has focused on the mutual help aspect of self-help: "Mutual helping is defined as helping of any kind that takes place between persons who are regarded as both potential help-givers and potential help-seekers. . . . Self-help should be seen as an extension, or sub-type, of mutual helping" (p. 169).

A few researchers have recognized the current restricted context of the concept of self-help (Ben-Ari & Azaiza, 1995; Hamilton, 1990; Lavoie et al., 1995). Hamilton (1990)

rightly argues that the contemporary view of self-help is more technical and narrow than it used to be and that the initial meanings of the two words "self" and "help" are not new to most people, minority groups, and mainstream society alike. However, their associated meanings are not necessarily the ones reported by the self-help literature or assigned by the self-help movement.

The Israeli population provides a good context in which to explore these two related issues because the modern phenomenon of self-help organizations is not yet widespread, while at the same time, many of the social constructs developed in Western countries are gradually being introduced into the culture. The tradition of self-help is quite established in Israel, even though it is not known as "self-help." Although the tradition of informal helping among family members, immigrants from the same province, or members of the same trade is widespread, those involved in such efforts most likely define it not as self-help, but rather as mutual help. Several scholars have dealt with self-help organizations in Israel (Bargal & Gidron, 1983; Ben-Ari, 1995; Gidron & Bargal, 1986) mainly within the context of the social structure. However, the particular ethnic culture and norms of behavior and their relationship to the philosophy of self-help groups have been examined only recently (Ben-Ari & Azaiza, 1995).

The self-help literature provides us with very few studies that deal with the associated meanings of the term (Hamilton, 1990; Katz & Bender, 1990; Lavoie et al., 1995; Shapiro,

1990). In one way or another, the context of self-help organizations has determined researchers' analyses and frameworks. Katz and Bender (1990), for example, in their historical review of self-help, shift the discussion to mutual aid. By so doing, they omit a cluster of meanings, such as the individual aspect of helping someone outside the context of a group or the problem-solving aspect of the phenomenon. It is apparent that, in such a context, it is difficult to identify the preliminary meanings associated with the concept.

This article does not limit the discussion only to the mutual aid aspect of self-help, but explores a larger scope of perceptions held by the general population in Israel concerning the self-help concept.

PROCEDURE

This study is an exploratory one and, as such, does not present research hypotheses, but rather research questions. It is based on a telephone survey of the Jewish population of Israel. A random sample was drawn from all Israeli telephone directories, divided according to geographical areas. Since 95 percent of Jewish Israeli households have a telephone, the sample is clearly representative of the population and is not demographically biased in favor of any socioeconomic strata. The sample consisted of 241 participants, who were selected according to a computerized random table. All participants were comfortable enough in Hebrew to understand the questions and to conduct a telephone conversation.

The telephone interviews lasted between 3 to 7 minutes and were conducted mostly in the evenings to increase the likelihood that both men and women would be available to answer the phone. Interviewers were third-year social work students trained to conduct a telephone interview. The interview included short open-ended questions regarding individuals' understanding of the concept of self-help and their attitudes toward involvement in self-help groups. The method used to code the responses was a simple descriptive content analysis.

In addition, demographic information was

collected about participants' gender, age, marital status, number of children, education, country of origin, and occupation. The variable, country of origin, was divided into three subcategories: Israel, Western origin, and Eastern origin.

RESULTS

Two underlying questions guided our analysis: What are the meanings associated with the self-help concept, and what are the attitudes toward involvement in self-help organizations, both on a general and on a personal level. Less than one-third of the participants reported that they have heard of the concept of self-help, whereas the majority (69.7 percent) reported that they have not. Only 10 percent of the individuals reported that they were involved in self-help groups.

To answer the question of the meanings associated with the concept of self-help among the general population of Israel, a content analysis was conducted. Seventeen categories of the meanings of the self-help concept were generated, from which six main themes emerged. They were, in descending order of frequency, problem solving, the individual meaning, non-professional help, mutual help, emotional support, and self-help groups. The most frequently reported response was problem solving regardless of any context, whether a group or individual, professional or non-professional: "Self-help means taking measures to find and participate in a process that can help you to deal with problems and solve them," and "Self-help means working to assist you in solving your problems." This was followed by the literal meaning, or the individual meaning, as reflected by the statements: "I help myself by referring and relying on my own resources," and "I help myself by taking charge over my life." The third most frequently mentioned theme was help specifically obtained from non-professionals: "Self-help means helping yourself in a group, but without the involvement of professionals or external support" and "helping yourself without professional guidance." Mutual help was the fourth associated meaning of the self-help concept, expressed in such

statements as "Self-help means I help you, you help me, we help each other" and "people getting together and helping each other." Emotional support was the fifth theme: "The meaning of self-help for me is to get and to offer emotional support" and "a group of people getting together to get emotional support." Finally, the sixth theme was self-help groups, as indicated by such responses as "people coming together to a self-help group and helping one another" and "a group of people helping themselves by their own efforts." That is, the very concept was conceived within the context of self-help groups.

Table 1 summarizes the most prevalent associated meanings of the concept among Israelis who reported that they had heard about the concept and those who had not.

Statistically significant differences between the two groups appeared in all themes associated with the self-help concept. Generally, more individuals who reported that they have heard about the concept assigned the specified meanings than did their counterparts. Interestingly, however, the meanings appeared in the same order in both groups.

In the same fashion, we wanted to compare those who reported involvement in self-help groups versus those who did not report such involvement (Table 2). Problem solving was the only theme that did not yield a statistically significant difference between those involved in self-help groups and those

who were not involved. Those who were involved in self-help groups were more likely to assign the meanings of mutual help, emotional support, and self-help groups, whereas those who were not involved were more likely to assign the individual meaning and the theme of non-professional help.

Further analysis was undertaken to determine the relationships between the associated meanings of the concept of self-help and various demographic variables. Gender differences were found in relation to two themes associated with the self-help concept: problem solving and non-professional help. Both men and women assigned the problem-solving meaning most frequently. However, the percentage was higher among men, with about 90 percent registering this meaning versus 76 percent of the women ($\chi^2=5.35$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). Likewise, the percentages assigning the non-professional meaning were 71 percent among men versus 62 percent among women ($\chi^2=5.17$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). Individuals who were doing some type of technical work were more likely to assign the problem-solving meaning to the self-help concept than were those working in education or in the helping professions ($\chi^2=6.02$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). Other demographic variables, such as country of origin, did not generate statistically significant differences regarding the associated meanings of the concept of self-help.

When asked about attitudes toward par-

Table 1. Associated Meanings of the "Self-Help" Concept: A Comparison Between Those Who Heard about the Concept and Those Who Have Not

	Those Who Heard (n=69)		Those Who Have Not Heard (n=114)		Chi-Square
	#	%	#	%	
Problem solving	55	75.3	91	54.1	20.4***
Individual meaning	43	58.9	91	54.1	27.2***
Non-professional help	43	58.9	80	47.6	22.0***
Mutual help	18	24.6	22	13.1	21.6***
Emotional support	14	19.1	12	7.1	24.0***
Self-help group	7	9.6	11	6.5	20.4***

* $p<0.05$

** $p<0.01$

*** $p<0.001$

Table 2. Associated Meanings of the Concept of "Self-Help": A Comparison Between Those Who Were Involved in Self-Help Groups and Those Who Were Not

	Involved (n=27)		Uninvolved (n=214)		Chi-Square
	#	%	#	%	
Problem solving	19	70.3	127	59.3	NS
Individual meaning	14	51.8	120	56.0	9.8***
Non-professional help	10	37.0	113	52.8	16.7***
Mutual help	11	40.7	29	13.5	14.5***
Emotional support	12	44.4	14	6.5	36.8***
Self-help group	7	25.9	11	5.1	17.4***

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Categories are not mutually exclusive

ticipation in self-help groups, we distinguished between a generic perception concerning participation in self-help groups and attitudes toward personal involvement in self-help groups (Table 3). There is a marked difference between Israelis' personal and general attitudes toward participation in self-help groups. Clearly, more positive attitudes are expressed toward general participation than toward personal involvement in self-help groups. Such personal involvement is defined here as the willingness to join a self-help group if a personal problem is encountered. When general attitudes toward participation are in question, the highest percentage of responses fall into the "positive" category, whereas this percentage decreases significantly when personal participation is in question. When participants expressed their attitudes toward personal participation in self-help groups, the highest percentage fell into the "no response" category.

Significantly more individuals who have heard of the self-help concept had a positive opinion about it than did those who have not ($\chi^2=14.0$, $df=3$, $p < 0.01$). As anticipated, significantly more individuals who have had some type of involvement with self-help groups had a higher positive generic opinion about involvement in these groups than did those who have had no such involvement. A

statistical difference was found between participants who were involved in self-help groups and those who were not with respect to their personal view of self-help involvement ($\chi^2=24.2$, $df=3$, $p < 0.01$).

DISCUSSION

This article addresses a question that until now has received very little research attention: the understanding among the general population of a social concept that was not developed within the context of its culture. Because lay people are the potential consumers of self-help organizations and groups, their associated meanings of the concept of self-help will influence their expectations of self-help groups, as well as their willingness to participate in such organizations. These two factors provide valuable information for professionals and policymakers who wish to promote the development of self-help organizations. Scholars, professionals, and policymakers alike have to be aware and sensitive to the various meanings attributed to the concept of self-help among the general population.

Probably the most striking finding is that the self-help concept is not a familiar one within Israeli culture, either on a literal or a conceptual level. Only one-third of a representative sample acknowledged that they have

heard of the concept. The expression "self-help" consists of two words that are in common usage when presented separately. However, when they come together, they no longer seem familiar. The association of the self-help concept with self-help groups and organizations is quite rare. Indeed, less than 10 percent of the sample made such a connection. These two findings indicate that the social awareness of the Israeli population regarding the phenomenon of self-help is still in its early stages of development.

In light of the unfamiliarity of the self-help concept, two other findings are of relevance. The most frequently cited meanings of the concept of self-help within the Israeli general population are problem solving, regardless of the context of self-help groups, and the individual meaning. One can assume that the individual meaning is constructed around participants' attempts to present their understanding of the literal meaning of the two words comprising the expression "self-help," which simply translates into "helping myself" in Hebrew. In turn, this can also connote the associated meaning of problem solving.

These observations have several ramifications that are both universal and culturally specific. Neither the self-help group context nor mutual help surfaces as the most prevailing associated meanings of the concept, supporting what has been suggested by various

researchers regarding the restricted and narrow scope of self-help as it traditionally appears in the literature (Ben-Ari & Azaiza, 1995; Hamilton, 1990; Lavoie et al., 1995).

The fact that the majority of participants reported that they have not heard of the concept enabled the exploration of the very preliminary associated meanings that laypeople attribute to the concept. Statistically significant differences did appear between those who reported that they have heard of the concept and those who have not. However, it is quite revealing that no differences appeared in their order. In other words, individuals in these two groups were more similar than different in their understanding of the self-help concept and the meanings they connect to it. This very finding suggests the unfamiliarity of the concept, since hearing about the concept does not make a qualitative difference in what people associate with it.

A different picture appears when participants who are involved in self-help groups are compared with those who are not. Again, the order of the associated meanings is the same for the two groups. However, it is more typical for those involved in self-help groups to connect the self-help concept with mutual help, emotional support, and with self-help groups than it is for those who are not involved in such groups. At the same time, it is more typical for those who are uninvolved to

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make a connection between the self-help concept and the literal and non-professional meanings. In that respect, those who are involved in self-help groups reflect their familiarity with the modern connotations of the self-help concept.

This finding is especially interesting, since it has been acknowledged that self-help groups facilitate the development of subcultures associated with certain vocabulary, behavioral codes, and even rituals (Powell, 1987, 1990). One could speculate that those Israelis who participate in self-help groups are just starting to internalize this jargon or integrate it into their everyday usage of the language. This might be an indication that the phenomenon of self-help organizations has not yet become a significant component of the social reality in Israel. These findings support the argument that the concept of self-help definitely does not have one particular meaning (Riessman, 1992), but rather has various meanings beyond the one primarily reported in the self-help literature; that is, mutual help. Limiting the discussion to self-help only within the context of self-help organizations and groups can add to the complexity of a situation that is already confusing, both in practice and research.

There is room for expanding the scope of the definition of self-help to include all variants of self-help on intranational and international levels. Lavoie, Borkman, and Gidron (1995) suggest that in the United States aid and support are given in various forms. For example, in the African-American community, the church is very active in initiating activities that are very similar in their functions and dynamics to self-help groups, although they are not named as such. Similarly, in developing countries where villages and extended family bonds still play a major role, support structures are different from the ones familiar to self-help organizations.

The apparent difference between respondents' general and personal attitudes toward participation in self-help groups may suggest that these groups are still viewed in a somewhat stigmatized light. It was anticipated that there would be a gap between the generic

perception of involvement in self-help groups and personal participation in such groups. Indeed, when respondents answered the question regarding their perception of involvement in self-help groups, they were significantly more positive about it than when they expressed their opinion about possible personal involvement. Self-help groups may have appeal as an abstract idea of helping, but are clearly less appealing as a viable personal option.

In Israel more than in the United States, the acknowledgement of participating in traditional therapy, encounter groups, or any other external help of this type is clearly not acceptable within the norms of the culture. Laypeople and scholars alike have recognized that Israelis present a tough front (Lieblich, 1983) and that any sign of weakness is perceived as a threat and thus concealed from view. Israelis respect independence, performance, and achievement more than words and feelings, and strength is tremendously important to their individual identity.

Seeking external help is often considered as a recognition of weakness. Relying on one's own resources within the context of problem solving more closely fits the norms of Israeli culture. Thus, in light of these observations, the findings regarding the associated meanings of the term "self-help" make sense. They fit the accepted norms of Israeli culture insofar as relying on one's own resources to solve problems is preferred over seeking professional help.

Interestingly, these cultural norms closely match the philosophy and atmosphere of self-help groups (Powell, 1987). In fact, they constitute the main themes of their operation. Therefore, it is our prediction that, although at the present self-help groups are still seen in a somewhat stigmatized light, after overcoming this barrier they will gain popularity and become a prevalent mode of assistance within Israeli communities.

Looking at the findings from this viewpoint, one could claim that the phenomenon of self-help organizations in Israel is still in its formative years. When contrasting self-

help organizations in the 1970s and the 1990s, Katz and Bender (1990) suggested that in the 1970s, self-help groups were seen primarily as encounter groups offering assistance for stigmatized individuals. Thus the situation of self-help organizations in the 1990s in Israel resembles the earlier stage of development in the United States.

The framework suggested by Gidron and Chesler (1995) refers to ethnic culture and norms of behavior as they relate to the universal and particularistic aspects of self-help. The Israeli ethnic culture and norms of behavior do not encourage admitting the need for external help, but rather promote expressions of self-help as reflected in the associated meanings of the participants in this study. It is only a matter of time until Israelis discover the universal and intrinsic attributes of self-help groups: the reliance on inner strengths and resources in the process of empowerment via problem solving.

Self-help groups have proven to be an effective community resource for the empowerment of both individuals and communities. However, the organization of self-help groups in Israel is in its early stages. Practically, this fact is reflected in underutilization of such a readily available resource. Not only is the concept unfamiliar but also those who are familiar with it do not necessarily make the connection between the concept and its practical implications. This observation points to the need to increase the utilization of self-help groups in Israel. As such, policymakers, professionals, and community activists would be advised to invest effort and resources in familiarizing individuals with the concept and its practical implications.

As the phenomenon of self-help progresses through more advanced developmental stages, longitudinal documentation of meaning and attitudinal changes would further inform communal service by providing insight into the use of this vital resource.

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