

**INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRD OF THE SPECIAL  
ISSUES ON CROSS-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF  
SELF-HELP/MUTUAL AID**

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As Guest Editor for the special issues on the cross-cultural aspects of self-help/mutual aid, I thank the authors and peer reviewers for their diligence and excellent work on the manuscripts. This third and final issue contains four articles, their authors and research sites representing three continents—Africa (Malawi), Europe, and North America. Several innovative features characterize this issue: the conceptualization of self-help, the methodology of studying groups, and a distinctive problem issue of economics.

How is the *self* in self-help/mutual aid conceptualized? Who is the *self*? Must it always and inevitably be an individual person—as found in most of the articles published in this Journal. The European psychosocial tradition of researchers who study self help/mutual aid (see Borkman, 2006-2007) are more likely to include the community or other social units as the self in self-help (see e.g., Humble & Unell, 1989) than those in the North American psychosocial tradition. Similarly, the micro-credit and economics tradition of self-help research often includes the community when conceptualizing self-help. Three of the four articles in this issue implicitly or explicitly view the self in self-help/mutual aid as a collective unit, not an individual person. In the first article titled “Participatory Action Research as a Form of Mutual Aid and Self-Help in Malawi” by Vanessa Duren-Winfield and Liz Barber, the self in self-help is the Malawian learning community of teachers, students and U.S. researchers-teachers. In the second article by Jerome Seliger, Audrey Simons and Carl Maida titled “Promotores-Focused Screening and Education to Improve Diabetes Awareness and Self-Care

in Low-Income Latino Intergenerational Families” a critical aspect of insuring culturally appropriate practices among the Latino adults who were the targets of the diabetes screening and educational intervention was to systematically include their family members. The entire project was conceived in terms of the importance of appealing to and including families in order to be acceptable to the target adults. Thus, the self in self-help was the targeted individual and his/her family. The third article by Angela Eikenberry titled “Giving Circles: Self-Help/Mutual Aid, Community Philanthropy, or Both?” describes a new form of financial giving. Individuals join a Giving Circle of like-minded persons with similar values; they research and decide as a collective where and how to distribute their philanthropic dollars. The Giving Circle as a unit collects information and chooses to whom to give their money rather than giving it to a professional charity such as the United Way who decides who can receive donations.

The use of a distinctive methodology Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the second innovative feature in this issue. PAR has been recommended as an appropriate methodology of self-help/mutual aid research (Borkman & Schubert, 1994; Chesler, 1991; Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998) but rarely has been used. Early in the study of contemporary self-help groups, Lieberman and Borman (1976) spoke of the difficulties in studying self-help groups not only because they were naturally occurring but also because groups were created intentionally with voluntary participation among members. Researchers’ access to such groups would be limited unless meaningful models of collaboration which were based on genuine partnerships between the researcher and group members could be developed and implemented. Participatory Action Research is a methodological strategy that can ideally produce a genuine partnership resulting in meaningful participation. PAR is a form of action research in which the researcher is oriented toward improving the situation of those being studied and it is a different paradigm of research than conventional research (Borkman & Schubert, 1994; Chesler, 1991; Nelson et al., 1998). In conventional research, the researcher holds the power to decide how to conduct the study (Borkman & Schubert, 1994; Chesler, 1991; Isenberg, Loomis, Humphreys, & Maton, 2004; Nelson et al., 1998); in PAR, the “subjects” of research, that is, the participants, share power with the researcher in actively negotiating and deciding who, what, when, and the how will be studied. Both parties participate in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data from the study; participants become co-researchers. A key advantage of PAR for researchers in an unfamiliar cross-cultural context is access to the experiential knowledge of the self-helpers—the co-researchers—who have extensive knowledge and know-how about their problem issue and its resolution to contribute to the research enterprise (Borkman & Schubert, 1994).

In practice PAR sometimes disappoints the researchers, the self-helpers or both parties. Isenberg et al. (2004) reported studies of collaborative research between self-help groups and researchers in 17 organizations finding that different goals, values, unresolved conflicts, and lack of clear communication were major

impediments to successful collaborations. Since a critical aspect of PAR is the need for the researcher and self-helpers to share power in making decisions about the research, conflict over power sharing can be a major stumbling block. In the article by Duren-Winfield and Barber, the American researchers report the PAR project in which they collaborated with the Malawian teacher and student community. Fortunately, the Americans shared the same goals and values as their Malawian counterparts. They were acutely aware of the additional complexities of power sharing in the cross-cultural context of researchers from an affluent developed country bringing aid to a local community in an impoverished developing country with minimal relevant resources. This is a successful PAR project that became a powerful learning process for everyone involved.

The third distinctive aspect of this special issue is that a relatively unconsidered problem area—economic aid—is the focus of an article: Angela Eikenberry's article on Giving Circles. Although major self-help/mutual aid researchers (Katz & Bender, 1990; Lieberman & Borman, 1976) acknowledged economic issues as part of the self-help group landscape, in actuality almost no studies of economic issues with the exception of the 12 step group Debtor's Anonymous (Hayes, 2001-2002) have been reported. Instead, a distinctive research tradition of self-help/mutual aid that I labeled micro-credit and economic has evolved quite separately from the health and psychosocial related research familiar to most of our readers (see Borkman, 2006-2007).

The first article by Vanessa Duren-Winfield and Liz Barber, titled "Participatory Action Research as a Form of Mutual Aid and Self-Help in Malawi," is distinctive in several ways, as has been previously mentioned. Methodologically, participatory action research, is used by the American action researchers taking a HIV/AIDS prevention project to Malawi, Africa. In developing training materials to prevent HIV/AIDS, the societal and cultural context are the primary factors that must be taken into account; only by partnering with the Malawian teachers and assisting them to develop educational materials relevant to their culture, situation, and students can the project succeed. The "self" in self-help is the community of learners and teachers, both Malawian and American that evolves partly due to the sensitivity of the American action researchers and to their appropriate use of the distinctive PAR methodology.

The second article, by Jerome Seliger, Audrey Simons, and Carl Maida, "Promotores-Focused Screening and Education to Improve Diabetes Awareness and Self-Care in Low-Income Underserved Latino Adults and Intergenerational Families in Los Angeles, California" describes the extensive efforts made by the researchers to tailor a diabetes screening and educational intervention to be culturally relevant and appeal to their target audience: Latino adults in a low income underserved area of Los Angeles, California. An important part of being culturally appropriate was to conceptualize the project in terms of the family focus of the Latinos; unlike the individual emphasis of many majority

audiences, the Latinos were known to be extremely family oriented; thus, the self in self-help is the targeted adult and his/her family. Another peer oriented aspect of the project was the focus on the role of *Promotores de Salud* (lay health educators) in helping to improve self-care behavior in a Latino transmigrant community some of whom are learning how to live with diabetes. The self-help program uses peer educators who are culturally congruent with the participants to provide social support needed to assist them in carrying out unfamiliar self-care behaviors. This approach not only improves health but also can be an economic stimulus for underserved communities by providing training and employment opportunities for peer educators on behalf of improving both community-based chronic disease self-care and mutual aid around related health issues.

The third article, Angela Eikenberry's article: "Giving Circles: Self-Help/Mutual Aid, Community Philanthropy, or Both?" considers an innovative but growing form of individual philanthropy in the United States called Giving Circles. Demographically similar people such as young white women or middle-class black women will form a group to pool resources and give them to some worthy cause—their potential giving is enlarged from what their actions as individuals would be as they collectively research and decide on alternative recipients, including individuals, not just charitable organizations. Thus, the *self* in self-help is a new form of group: a Giving Circle. This article also addresses the relatively unstudied problem issue—economic aid. Eikenberry, a public administration doctorate, questions whether the framework of community philanthropy or self-help/mutual aid is a better fit for the phenomena that she studied.

The final article is an Experience Report by Jürgen Matzat, a psychology doctorate and long-time Director of a self-help clearinghouse. The Editor Fred Massarik introduced the idea of Experience Reports in an invitation in Vol. 2, No. 2; he described them as "narrative statements of persons who have been involved directly in self-help and self-care experiences. These 'Experience Reports' are intended to reflect directly what it is like to be part of a self-help process, in terms of the subjective sense of 'being there'—sensing and then reporting what has occurred" (Massarik, 2003-2004, p. 89). Dr. Matzat's article titled "Self-Help/Mutual Aid in Germany—A 30-Year Perspective of a Participant Observer" beautifully connects the national context, health care system, and professional help systems with the evolution of self-help/mutual aid in Germany as he has viewed and participated in it for over 3 decades. The article reflects again how important professional supporters are and have been in the development of self-help groups and clearinghouses. Germany is unusual in having the largest network of self-help clearinghouses of any country in the world; and, importantly, the network is financed by the nationalized health care system (Matzat, 2001-2002).

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