

English summary

“Thank you for trusting”. Reciprocity, transformation and ritual grammar in self-organized self-help groups

(«Takk for tilliten». Gjensidighet, transformasjon og rituell grammatikk i selvorganiserte selvhjelpsgrupper)

This thesis explores processes of individual transformation within groups characterized by an egalitarian structure and ethos. The analysis aims at illuminating how values of trust, recognition and different modes of social exchange may be mutual constitutive and represent central elements in transformative processes.

The study examines ‘mixed’ or ‘neutral’ self-help/mutual aid groups, a particular kind of self-help/mutual aid groups that have evolved in Norway over the last decades, and which aims at personal identity work across different categories of life-problems. The basic idea is that participating in such groups is conducive to the identification of more general and common themes of relational and emotional character (such as anxiety, low self-esteem, shame) underlying “the problem”, enabling participants to identify mutual understandings that enhance their ability to cope. In spite of a growing literature on self-help groups, neutral groups have not been identified internationally. Against this background, the thesis asks: Why has this practice emerged in Norway, what kind of processes can be identified in groups of this kind, and how are their internal identity work interlinked with broader social and cultural processes of late modernity?

Data are based on studies of six self-help groups, four of which have been subject to long term field work. While the majority of groups were organized by a city wide self-help centre in Oslo (LINK Oslo), some were initiated by patient education resources centres (LMS) in Vestfold county. Field work includes the groups’ institutional settings; LINK Oslo, LMS Vestfold and the National Competence Centre Self-Help Norway. The groups are self-organized in the sense that they have no outside or formal leadership. They are, however, set up by the centre and guided through an initial phase. The threshold for participation is low. Participation is free of charge, and does not require professional referral. To participate you simply need to acknowledge that you have a ‘problem’ that you must address or deal with.

Long-term observations of interactional processes in self-help groups are scarce, as are ethnographically based analyses of transformative processes in therapeutic groups. Through detailed descriptions of transactional sequences as well as the observation of groups over a longer period (from 2-3 to 12 months), the thesis identifies the mechanisms of successful and unsuccessful transformation processes. The groups are studied as ritual practice and social technique through which individuals exchange experiences on how to cope with conditions of existence in late modernity, especially the management of flexible selves. Throughout the text the practice of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) serves as a contrast that

allows the articulation of the practices of neutral groups and their approach to the management of the self and the conditions of suffering.

The thesis combines theories of initiation rituals, healing rituals, the theory of front- and backstage, together with perspectives on cultural traditions of coping with emotional and relational suffering. The analyses shows that groups are ritual practices characterized by strict, outside borders combined with a striking loose, internal, ritual grammar that has to be constantly revised and negotiated. When successful, the group process takes the form of “self-organizing” ritual processes, a kind of “social jazz”, characterized by high degree of self-closure and complexity, generating new aspects of themselves during their very operation (Handelman 2004).

Essential for transformative processes is the practice of *balanced, transformative reciprocity*. Social exchange may alternate between modes of sharing, characteristic of “anarchic solidarity”, and modes of gift-giving, connected to risk-taking, interpretation and negotiation of meaning, balancing sequences of symmetry and asymmetry. These modes of reciprocity are discussed as central elements in generating trust and the dynamic intertwinement between states of vulnerability and confirmation of solidarity. This is essential in processes where individuals are seeking reinterpretation of themselves and their social relations.

As transformative rituals of late modernity, group interaction is highly focused on individuals working on their inner selves, enhancing their subjectivity. Practices of confession, by the externalization of inner states and expressions of authenticity, are discussed in relation to values concerning personal responsibility, the significance of a flexible, yet holistic image of the self and the recognition of suffering. The interaction and self-reflexivity of groups may easily be regarded as part of a globally growing “therapeutic culture” and a neo-liberal demand for the enhancement of emotional and relational capital. Nevertheless, the study illustrates how groups are arenas where fundamental social and cultural formations and values are collectively met, discussed, modified, remodelled and challenged.

Finally, the study analyses how the development of therapeutic, universalistic oriented model of self-help has been made possible in close collaboration with the health authorities within the frames of the Norwegian welfare state. The National Competence Centre “Self-help Norway” is regarded as an example of governmentality as well as hybridity, both institutionally and by promoting a practice generated in the borderland between voluntarism and state regulations, in an area of tension between autonomy and integration. Included in this perspective is a discussion of how the self- help model of neutral groups accentuates “Norwegian” values of sameness and equality by the way values are made equivalent across contexts.