

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Sharing Experience, Living and Learning: A Study of Self-Help Groups*, by K. T. Elsdon with John Reynolds and Susan Stewart (2000), London: Community Matters. 126 pp. 4.50 British pounds. Order through Self-Help Nottingham at [www.selfhelp.org.uk](http://www.selfhelp.org.uk)

Books dedicated to Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the UK are a rare find. Whilst the service user movement in the UK is well established and both patient and informal self-help and mutual aid groups thrive, the attention of mainstream academic research has been primarily with formalised groups of service users/patients and how they are integrated into and influence (or otherwise) mainstream health and social care services. Since the 1980s UK policies have encouraged or indeed made mandatory “experiential” voices in the development and delivery of welfare services. Arguably however, there remains little distinction or understanding made between an individual’s experiential knowledge of their condition and the collective wisdom developed over time in SHGs.

So, although published some 13 years ago there is still much to recommend in Elsdon et al.’s specific study of SHGs as well as the book providing an insight into the welfare landscape of the UK. The book is primarily based around the results from a study that Elsdon and colleagues undertook with 117 self-help groups in the Nottingham area of the England, UK. The data used in the book is from a survey included open ended questions inviting comments from respondents, plus telephone interviews. In addition eight case studies were developed with groups.

The book is structured into eight chapters. The early chapters cover such proverbial and still contested issues such as “what are SHGs,” how do they relate to other forms of voluntary organisations, what type of activities do groups engage in, and what happens in a meeting? The strength of the book is that it uses very rich data from their study to both illustrate common features amongst groups as well as highlighting the sheer range and nuances of groups.

Later chapters turn to both the practical and political aspects of groups. Chapter 4 draws on the survey and case study data to look at the complex reasons for group

membership as well as perceived benefits. One of many interesting findings is that less than half of the SHGs in the sample dealt with conditions whose cause were directly medical. Benefits identified fit with the existing evidence base in the field with sharing experiences, getting support and sharing understandings featuring as the major benefits. Chapter 6 explores the types of training needs identified by the groups covering both generic needs such as how to set up and sustain a group, to needs for networking and funding advice etc. to more specialist help required for example with understanding and finding others with rare illnesses.

The book concludes with a chapter that places SHGs in their political context exploring such factors as self-help groups and the economy, active citizenship and civil society and the contribution groups make to the social fabric of their community. Many of these debates have moved on since the book was written and there is little linking of the debates (here or indeed throughout the book) to established literature in the field which is somewhat disappointing but maybe understandable given the books target audience is practice rather than academia based.

The major limitation of the book is that the authors repeatedly claim that their results can be extrapolated to other areas of the UK given that the total population in their study area represents as much as 1.104% of the total population of the UK (then 58 million). In fact, the study is based in the Nottingham region which although population wise is a good representation of the UK it is in fact a quite atypical area of the UK. It has a long and rare history of mutual aid activity stretching back to the industrialisation era and has had since the 1970's unique support for SHGs in the form of Self Help Nottingham, the equivalent of a US style clearing house which networks and provides support for local groups as well as raising awareness with local health and social care providers. This means that claims for activity in SHG's of 0.4 per 1,000 persons in the population have to be treated with a great deal of caution. Nevertheless, the authors claim that their study and other UK research indicates that SHGs are developing at a faster rate than any other form of voluntary activity in the UK.

As an introductory text, particularly for practitioners supporting self-help, the book provides a very good starting point for getting to grips with the sheer range, types, and activities of SHGs as well as situating them as part of the UK's voluntary sector.

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