

# Själv men inte ensam om självhjälpsgrupper i Sverige

Akademisk avhandling som för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen vid Stockholms universitet  
offentligen försvaras i aula Svea, hörsal 13, Sveaplan, fredagen den 17 maj 2002 kl 10.00.

Av  
**Magnus Karlsson**  
Socionom

Institutionen för socialt arbete  
Stockholms universitet  
106 91 Stockholm

Stockholm 2002  
ISBN: 91-7265-449-X  
ISSN: 0281-6288

## Abstract

In this thesis, self-help groups are defined as small, autonomous groups of people that meet regularly to cope with a shared problem through mutual aid. There is reason to believe that self-help group activity is increasing in Sweden. Since no general attempts to map self-help group activity have been made in Sweden, one aim of this study was to *map such activities in ten strategically selected geographical areas*. A second aim was to *analyze the internal and external circumstances of these groups* in order to improve our knowledge about Swedish self-help groups in general.

The thesis builds on four empirical studies. *The first study* aimed to map self-help group activity in the ten selected regions, using a questionnaire sent to vicars in the Church of Sweden, heads of welfare offices, head counselors in the health service and representatives of voluntary organizations (n=599). *The second study* sought a broader understanding of the internal and external circumstances of self-help groups. Eight groups, strategically selected from the outcome of the first study, were group interviewed. The aim of *the third study* was to examine whether the results of the group interviews were valid for all the groups found in the initial mapping. A questionnaire (27 items) was sent to key persons (n=73) in the groups. *The fourth and final study* had a partially deductive approach. One aim was to improve our understanding of the roles played by different kinds of knowledge in the groups. A second aim was to test whether the participants in the groups were “peers” or whether there were leaders in the groups in terms of creating, upholding and representing different kinds of knowledge. Four groups, comprising 18 migraine sufferers, were examined by means of a personal questionnaire, a network test and group interviews.

The results of the studies showed that 0.5 percent of the population in the selected regions belonged to a self-help type of group at the time for the study. The most common problems among the 228 groups found were related to alcohol (44), illness and physical disorder (41), grief (22) and parenthood (21). Group members emphasized the importance of *mutual understanding* in their groups, and in the thesis the groups are understood on the theoretical basis of sociology of knowledge. The thesis argues that a specific kind of knowledge - *experiential knowledge* - is developed in self-help groups. This kind of knowledge is based on mutual understanding and contributes to a deeper understanding. Some differences between experiential knowledge and professional knowledge are highlighted. Besides mutual understanding, the participants valued the *spirit of community* and the *information* given in the groups. Finally, the results indicate that groups that had a formal leader (representing professional knowledge) tended to value information more, while groups where the participants were peers (relying on experiential knowledge) primarily valued mutual understanding.

In this thesis, self-help groups are seen as belonging to the third sector, and therefore as related to voluntary organizations. However, it is argued that self-help groups may be a contemporary phenomenon with the participants often being *consumers* rather than *members*. Despite the group constellation, self-help groups may sometimes have the value of an individual project.

Key words: self-help group, mutual aid group, mutual understanding, mutual support, experiential knowledge, professional knowledge, voluntary work