

# **BUILDING MUTUAL AID AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS: THE EXPERIENCES OF HONG KONG SOCIAL WORKERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Among young people with emotional and behavioral problems (EBP), mutual aid is likely to be valuable in their rehabilitation and deserving of social work support. The benefits of mutual aid stem from the possibility that it prolongs the effective contribution of social work service. Given its potential benefits, it is imperative to clarify the ways in which social work service maximizes these benefits. Such clarification is necessary both to verify untested theories about social work inputs to mutual aid and because the research literature on mutual aid among young people is particularly lacking. Based on data from three focus groups involving social workers in Hong Kong, this study seeks to demonstrate the relevance of theoretically based group work strategies in the mutual aid and rehabilitation of EBP youth. These strategies include identifying commonalities and setting priorities, balancing support with demand, optimizing input between social workers and members, and connecting members with relevant others in the community. The research and service implications of the findings of this study for promoting efficient social work input that contributes to the long-term development of young people are discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescence and the biological, intellectual, emotional, and social changes accompanying this developmental period can be difficult. In-

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tertwined with these developmental changes is the expression of a range of emotional and behavioral problems (hereafter referred to as EBP; Dryfoos, 1990). Some of these problems are age-normative and involve experimentation (e.g., alcohol use, minor delinquency), whereas the more severe expressions of such problems exhibited by others (e.g., criminal behavior, depressive disorders) may impose constraints on both current functioning and future developmental trajectories (Harrington, Rutter, & Fombonne, 1996). Relative to their peers, young people with EBP experience elevated dropout rates, higher levels of unemployment and underemployment, lower rates of civic and community participation, and higher rates of incarceration (Lane, Carter, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006).

Previous research indicates that young people who have EBP are amenable to social work support, notably through group work that promotes mutual aid (Heckman & Lochner, 2000; Yan, 2001). This kind of intervention has become increasingly crucial in both maximizing the contribution of social work and minimizing its costs. As such, a key common factor in the success of social work input in promoting youth mutual aid is the promotion of sustainable social capital, which rests on altruism and social support in a socially desirable way (Jagendorf & Malekoff, 2000). The ultimate desirable outcome is rehabilitation from various problems, and sustaining mutual aid is a necessary step toward realizing its contribution to such rehabilitation. Hence, the major concern is not whether mutual aid is helpful, but how to make it helpful, including promoting the provision of mutual aid in a constructive way.

Given the potential benefits of mutual aid, it is imperative to clarify the ways in which social work service can be used to maximize these benefits. This study draws on data collected from three focus group interviews with social workers in Hong Kong to illuminate the key factors in group work practice that are conducive to the mutual aid and rehabilitation of EBP youth. By capitalizing on the experiences gained by social workers in interacting with this population, this study seeks to provide new ideas for further research on the provision of services to EBP youth and, consequently, lead to more efficient social work input that will enhance the positive development of these young people.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### *Conceptualizing the Mutual Aid Group*

The idea of a group as a system for mutual aid is rooted in an ecological conception of the nature of the relationship between individuals

and society wherein individuals have a natural impetus toward growth and belonging, and society has a similar impetus to integrate its parts into a productive and dynamic whole (Schwartz, 1977). In this view, the small group is a special case of the larger individual-social engagement, which resembles an enterprise in mutual aid or an alliance of individuals who need each other to work on certain common problems. Since group members share common experiences and concerns, they are often receptive to one another's views, suggestions, and challenges. As members reach out to one another, they experience a variety of helping relationships and become increasingly participative in interpersonal processes. Mutual aid encourages members to struggle, to offer and receive help from one another, and thus to accomplish the purpose of the group (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005).

For members to experience mutual aid, they need to demonstrate to one another specific kinds of behavior in group processes (Gitterman, 2005). Among these are trust and acceptance, which require an ability to convey to others their worth, express care and interest, and offer helpful and empathic suggestions. Providing hope is another type of behavior that is essential to mutual aid. Being helped to feel that one has one's own as well as the group's collective resources to make things different and better is a powerful incentive to undertaking new types of coping behavior. Finally, mutual aid is experienced through the tangible behavior of helping one another. Group members provide support by helping one another to manage the devastating pain of loss and isolation. In addition to managing feelings, mutual aid also empowers members to learn how to help one another to solve their difficulties (Shulman, 2005).

Although research has affirmed the value of the mutual aid group, promoting this kind of intervention is especially a problem due to the difficulties involved in encouraging disadvantaged populations to provide mutual aid (Kelly, 2003; King, Olson, Lawson, Trott, & Baj, 2000). Research suggests that social work input assumes an important role in establishing and sustaining mutual aid (Laudet, Magura, Cleland, Vogel, & Knight, 2003). The major findings of prior studies in this area are discussed below.

### *Social Work Inputs Essential to Mutual Aid*

Prior studies show that the effectiveness of mutual aid groups hinges on a number of factors pertinent to the critical interplay between the social worker and the group members (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005). Among these is the early initiation of mutual aid during social work service because it is much easier to keep people in mutual aid during services than after it (Kelly, 2003). In addition, early initiation is im-

portant to sustain persistent mutual aid because such aid is self-enforcing (Laudet et al., 2003). Whereas the ecological and strengths approaches form the working model for mutual aid, it is the social worker's input in identifying common concerns among members that provides the foundation for support (Gitterman, 2005). The social worker begins with a clear idea of the group's purpose and translates commonality into specific operational tasks. Groups can be formed around common issues such as developmental struggles (e.g., learning-disabled adolescents), difficult life status (e.g., separating or divorcing parents), desired or undesired life changes (e.g., school transitions, parenthood, or retirement), and crisis events (e.g., the loss of a loved one). When people are conscious of their common concerns, they are more motivated to offer mutual aid (Mankowski, Humphreys, & Moos, 2001).

Moreover, the relationship between the social worker and group members appears to be a factor that contributes to the effectiveness of mutual aid (Anderson-Butcher, Khairallah, & Race-Bigelow, 2004). The role of a social worker is to help people form a mutual aid group by developing exchanges and trust. As such, the social worker can facilitate rewarding interaction and activity, the reciprocation of aid to the immediate helper, and the unconditional provision of aid (Jagendorf & Malekoff, 2000). There are also obvious exchanges between the social worker and group members. Thus, when group members are actively involved in social work service, they receive more support from the social worker and come to trust him or her in providing guidance. This is why mutual aid develops to the greatest extent when group members are receiving social work service (Kelly, 2003). However, a mutual aid group requires the social worker to retreat from the group gradually (Litwak & Meyer, 1966). For a mutual aid group to mature, group dependence on the social worker needs to decline. The social worker cannot maintain his or her leadership of the group indefinitely, but must eventually become a guest, an advisor, or even an independent onlooker as group development progresses. At the same time, group members will develop forms of resistance to the social worker's intervention. It is therefore necessary to achieve a balance in coordination between the social worker and the group (Lammers, 1991; Ngai, 2004).

Although the evidence demonstrating the benefits of mutual aid to young people with EBP is sporadic, the importance of encouraging socially desirable social capital to reduce youth problems is evident. Most notably, research and theory have popularized the preventive

and remedial effects of social capital on youth behavioral problems (Parcel & Dufur, 2001). The benefits of social capital can come from schoolmates and teachers (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Conversely, association with delinquent peers tends to create negative social capital that aggravates behavioral problems (Zhang & Messner, 1996). This differentiation between the favorable effects of schoolmates and the adverse effects of delinquent peers is paramount. Hence, it is important for social work intervention to be carried out in a way that ensures that young people have access to mutual aid from socially desirable peers. Social bonds with conventional adult institutions are crucial for furnishing social capital that effectively dampens behavioral problems (Costello & Vowell, 1999; Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001).

Taken as a whole, the preceding literature review shows that the mutual aid group is a valuable means of prolonging and extending the benefits of social work, and reveals some important factors in social work practice that are essential to the effectiveness of mutual aid among service users. Nevertheless, the extant findings are mostly drawn from mutual help among adults and older people, and thus they do not provide much insight into mutual aid among EBP youth. There is still a need for research on mutual aid and the development of social capital among this population.

#### METHOD

In the spring of 2008, three focus group interviews with 15 Hong Kong social workers were conducted to explore the use of mutual aid groups by the interviewees through self-narration. These social workers were affiliated with various community-based services for young people with EBP. Care was taken to select a wide range of interviewees in terms of service experience. The average length of service among the interviewees was about eight years (although it ranged from one to 20 years). An interview guide, in the form of a series of general questions designed to elicit interviewees' opinions on mutual aid groups for EBP youth, the social workers' input into such groups, and the effects of this input, was used to keep the narrative within the frame of reference for the study. A non-directive approach was used in which the interviewees were given maximum freedom to articulate their own experiences. Each interview lasted about two hours. The interviews were all audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. Analysis of the interview transcripts was carried out in steps as follows (Burr, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, key terms and themes

were identified. Second, these terms and themes were examined with reference to the global organizing features of the transcripts: major events, the protagonists and their relationships, and the network of terms around which the arguments were articulated. At the end of this process, we organized the material in accordance with the practice strategies used by the interviewees to fashion their own style of mutual aid group.

Member checking was used to ensure that the analysis represented the experiences of the interviewees as accurately as possible. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Padgett (1998), this procedure requires researchers to seek verification of their interpretations by going back to their interviewees. This is an important step in guarding against researcher bias because it demonstrates to interviewees that their views are not only taken into account, but are also valued as authoritative. It is also a logical extension of the trusting relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. In line with this procedure, the interviewees were invited to read our accounts of the interviews and to react to them, thus allowing emerging interpretations to be evaluated and refined. In this way, member checking ensured that a wider range of interpretations could be examined. The suggestions made by the interviewees concerning the key social work input conducive to mutual aid among EBP youth were incorporated into the final analysis.

## RESULTS

### *Views on Mutual Aid Youth Groups*

The interviewees were unanimous in their views on the value and importance of mutual aid youth groups. They argued that social work should be adjusted to place greater emphasis on building and benefiting from youth strengths. Young people should not be treated as inadequate or as incapable of helping themselves. For these social workers, mutual aid is a valuable means of extending the benefits of social work, especially when young people maintain enduring support networks after receiving social work service. Furthermore, mutual aid can be particularly useful in helping EBP youth because professional social work services are usually provided on a short-term basis. As such, the benefits of these services tend to decay over time unless service users maintain mutual aid relations among themselves. Moreover, young people are potentially receptive to mutual aid from peers because they prefer peer interaction.

Tang: The mutual aid group is especially important for EBP youth. One of the important elements leading to their improvement and rehabilitation is that they know one another's concerns very well. Activities that involve mutual support give them chances to explore what they want to do. This kind of group should continue to develop so that young people have more room for positive growth. I don't think we social workers are the ones to impart all important things to them. On the contrary, young people learn and grow through the processes of making friends and supporting others.

### *Identifying Commonalities and Setting Priorities*

For the majority of the interviewees, the primary task of a social worker in a mutual aid group is to capture the most pressing issues and concerns in the members' lives. Paying attention to members' vulnerabilities provides the social worker with critical points of entry into their lives. By taking care to begin with the members' perceptions of their life situations, social workers can minimize the resistance they may encounter from individual members and the group as a whole.

Sing: I have organized groups for young people who exhibit problems such as isolation or being a bully at school. Within the group, they share and learn how to improve interpersonal relationships. A healing process occurs when young people realize that they are not alone and that others share their problems and feelings. They learn how rapport is developed among people such that isolation or bullying can be relieved and they can become more considerate toward their fellow students.

In addition, most of the interviewees commented that it is important to help youth translate their identified needs into priorities. This offers social workers and members a common frame of reference. Emphasis was placed on the processes for tasks that provide the opportunity for positive outcomes because success is a powerful motivator for involvement and mutual support.

Jane: My group members have a keen interest in dancing, and they used to get together for dancing practice on a regular basis. We showed them dance videos or accompanied them to dance shows so that they could learn from others. Dancing is now more than an interest for them. They regard dancing as something they can earn a living from. Also, dancing can give them a sense of achievement.

### *Encouraging Reciprocal Transactions and Mutual Assistance*

In building a mutual aid system, all of the interviewees had made great efforts to assist group members to develop a sense of communion and integration. One of the most common strategies was to provide a

platform for reciprocal transactions with other young people. By helping members to talk to and become involved with one another, the worker lays a foundation for mutual support.

Wong: Our support group aims to provide young people with a platform for making new friends and enjoying their leisure time. We simply provide them with a venue and some interaction tools such as video games or play materials. The role of the social worker is to be someone who initiates activities by introducing and demonstrating games to the group. When one of the members is good in a particular field, such as playing video games, we step back from the group and let him/her play and talk with the others.

Lee: The group is like a family to its members. In addition to holding regular meetings, I encourage them to maintain contact with one another through phone calls or Xanga. We also go out for a meal on Chinese festivals or for someone's birthday.

Another type of important social worker input is to encourage members to provide mutual assistance to one another. Carrying a burden is often easier when others express their understanding. Having peers who try to share one's pain can be a beneficial experience. In addition, tangible assistance among youth, such as the sharing of information on jobs available in the neighborhood, can be more useful than support from the social worker. More importantly, encouraging mutual assistance within the group gives the message that the social worker trusts members' ability and that members' understanding of one another is valued. They come to believe that their insights, thoughts, ideas, and recommendations are worthwhile, valuable, and trustworthy.

Bob: One of my group members sent an instant message to another group member saying there was nothing worth living for. Other members realized that he might want to commit suicide, so they all helped look for him. With the help of communication tools such as cell phones and the Internet, the message was soon spread widely. They were able to find and be with him in his darkest moments.

Lun: The young people in my group were school dropouts and used to fool around all day. They gradually realized that it was time to look for employment, and so began referring jobs to each other. Now all of them have been working in the same company for a year. I believe that this is because of their mutual aid. As a result of cultivating friendship and mutual trust among them, the group members now refer jobs to each other, rather than relying on me. They are now willing to share career information with others and support each other when they are working.

### *Balancing Support with Demand*

For most of the interviewees, caring and support are not enough in themselves; these factors have to be integrated with mutual demand, in which the social worker helps members take responsibility for their actions and the change process. In particular, it is important for the social worker to facilitate the development of norms and sanctions that provide clearer behavioral guidelines and promote mutual aid. When members are clear about what kinds of behavior are preferred, permitted, proscribed, and prohibited, they are likely to be less anxious and become more available to one another.

David: There is a drug user in the group, and other members urge him to quit. If they realize that nothing has changed, they scold him for that. This shows that they are acting to change one another's behavior. They create their own norms within their dancing culture, and these are norms that are formed not by the social worker, but by themselves. For example, they should not arrive or leave early without a reason. If they cannot make it, then it will affect the whole team. They therefore say "No drugs! No alcohol!" Indeed, some members have quit drugs because they want to dance.

According to the interviewees, the key to the success of youth mutual aid is to encourage collective action and meaningful activities. Most of them remarked that members need opportunities to act in their collective interest and to participate in mutually satisfying activities. These activities require planning, achieving consensus and compromise in group decision-making, and the specification of roles and tasks among members. By encouraging meaningful activities and experiencing collective success, the group becomes a source of mutual aid and satisfaction.

Carmen: I have a group for young people who study at a private school that admits students with poor academic results. The group aims to teach these young people about making desserts and to facilitate their participation in volunteer work. Through my coaching on organizing skills and by giving the members credit for their contributions, the members have started to do the preparation work and planning themselves, such as cooking food and preparing recipes. Through making and serving desserts to senior citizens at a community center, the group has helped to build mutual support among members, cultivated their sense of social responsibility, and enabled them to attain a feeling of accomplishment.

### *Balancing Input between Social Workers and Members*

In planning and rendering support among group members, social work input is necessary to sustain mutual aid. However, all of the

interviewees agreed that a delicate balance is required to optimize the interaction between the social worker and group members. The interviewees said that in the early stages of a relationship, when commitment to that relationship is weak, the social worker's leadership of the group can serve to bring members together. When commitment is strong at a later stage of the relationship, members are likely to receive aid from other members through reciprocation. Accordingly, the social worker is required to retreat from the mutual group gradually over time. Members' dependence on social workers should decline if the mutual aid group is to mature.

Lun: At the beginning, I took a leading role to promote mutual aid between members. However, I eventually stepped back when things had reached a certain stage. Our roles reversed, and they now ask if I am going to join in when they have organized a certain activity. I think this shows that my role has become less important. When they need some kind of information, they still think of me, but my role is no longer directive.

Carmen: I had a high level of input at an early stage, since I helped arrange their volunteer service or wrote session plans for them., They were only partially responsible for these tasks. I have now passed on all responsibility to them. I let them take charge of their volunteer activities. My role is to act as a mere advisor.

### *Connecting Members to Relevant Others in the Community*

Although they recognized the value and importance of youth mutual aid, the interviewees remarked that a careful differentiation between its favorable and adverse effects is paramount. They cautioned that peer support may at times merely encourage young people to get together and hang out, look for ways to socialize and skip classes, or even abuse drugs. Thus, it is important for social work intervention to ensure that young people have access to mutual aid from socially desirable peers. Social bonds with conventional adult institutions are crucial for furnishing social capital that effectively restrains behavioral problems. Such an approach also fosters mutual understanding between young people and relevant others in the community, which in the long run helps improve public perceptions of EBP youth.

Ma: In addition to mutual aid within the group, I hope members can receive outside support. Thus, if possible, I introduce to the group mentors recruited from local universities or the business sector to allow members to link these mentors to their own life goals or stories. In the past, if anyone in the group said he/she was unhappy and wanted to go for a drink, then the whole group would drink together. Now, if there is a mature mentor in the group, he/she may suggest going dancing or shar-

ing a problem to allow the negative emotion to be expressed. To the young people in the group, these kinds of suggestions would have been difficult to imagine in the past.

Jane: We now play a bridging role in which we connect young people with the community, giving them more opportunities to take part in meaningful activities. The most obvious example is that there is an increasing number of caring companies that invite my group to perform at their annual balls. These companies believe this can both enrich young people's portfolios and broaden their horizons beyond the neighborhood they live in. The young people do not complain about my taking up so many jobs for them. On the contrary, they and their families support these activities.

## DISCUSSION

This study seeks to explore important factors in group work practice that are conducive to mutual aid among EBP youth. Based on an analysis of the narratives generated from focus group interviews with Hong Kong social workers, the study gives examples of the more significant professional strategies used by social workers, and suggests that mutual aid youth groups offer significant developmental benefits. Participating in prosocial activities, learning new skills and receiving recognition for involvement may allow EBP youth to gain confidence and critical awareness, develop a healthier identity, and experiment with more positive roles. Youth mutual aid and its developmental benefits may explain why participation in groups organized by social workers reduces delinquency and alienation. This understanding succinctly substantiates theory and research on mutual aid groups (Heckman & Lochner, 2000; Kelly, 2003; Laudet et al., 2003; Yan, 2001) and supplements existing knowledge by elaborating key social work input that is essential to beneficial mutual aid among youth.

### *Elements of an Effective Mutual Aid Group for EBP Youth*

As mutual aid can be developmentally beneficial, it would seem to be a useful exercise to design future interventions for EBP youth using the group work strategies identified in this study as a yardstick. The first element to be considered is peer acceptance and approval, which suggests that having young people work together in groups is consistent with the mutual aid model. The mutual experiencing of ideas and emotions among members leads to a powerful healing process in which members are "all in the same boat." Group participation is important to the mutual aid model, as individuals are able to learn from and

support one another (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005; Jagendorf & Malekoff, 2000). A second element of an effective mutual aid group involves the nature of the experiences in which young people become involved. Many commentators note that such experiences should be important to the community (Kurth-Schai, 1988; Ngai, 2006a). The findings of this study clearly indicate that the nature of such experiences should involve meaningful activities, skill development, and active participation. Third, young people must be properly recognized for their work. Generating feelings of competence and success is an important part of the mutual aid process, as it enhances self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gitterman, 2005). Furthermore, when young people experiment with new roles, positive recognition reinforces their participation in prosocial activities (Heckman & Lochner, 2000). A fourth element for consideration is ensuring that there is time for group members to critically reflect on their experiences. Reflection provides young people with a way of looking back at their experiences, evaluating them, and applying what has been learned in future experiences (Ngai & Ngai, 2005). This can be seen in our finding that providing opportunities for reflection, such as a debriefing session after volunteer service, is an important means by which young people integrate prior knowledge and experiences with new experiences to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. A fifth element to be considered is the role of adults versus the role of peers. Although young people are more peer-oriented, they still value their parents, teachers, and relevant others for guidance in their transition to adulthood (Dryfoos, 1990). Due to the importance of role modeling and positive reinforcement in the youth mutual aid process, adults can provide much of the needed behavioral reference and positive recognition (Ngai, 2004). This study shows that a mentor associated with conventional adult institutions is appropriate. In their era of advancement, the presence of a more experienced person usually helps to guide less experienced young people through the mutual aid process.

#### *Balanced Coordination: Optimizing Social Workers' Input and Members' Talents*

The presence or absence of the above elements may mediate the outcomes of a mutual aid group for EBP youth. This very much hinges on the ability of social workers to release these powerful forces for change and growth. Social workers must be clear about their role in the group. Group processes can become very complex, and a worker without a clear and internalized sense of how one helps in the group will inevitably become as lost as the group members (Gitterman &

Shulman, 2005). In this respect, our findings echo previous research that social workers need to adjust their roles when progress is made in group development to optimize young people's talents for task performance and mutual aid (Litwak & Meyer, 1966; Shulman, 2005). At an early stage, when the commitment of young people to the group is weak, the social worker's leadership can serve to bring them together. In contrast, when commitment is strong at a later stage, young people are likely to receive aid from other members through reciprocation. Thus, an effective mutual aid youth group requires the social worker to retreat from the group gradually. Declining dependence on the social worker in the maturation phase of a group signifies that young people are capable of sustaining mutual aid among themselves (Lammeres, 1991; Ngai, 2004). Social workers should welcome and facilitate such a movement in their groups. After all, helping a group of young people move through life transitions so that their adaptive functions and problem-solving skills are supported and strengthened is a valuable and important professional activity (Jagendorf & Malekoff, 2000).

*Person-Environment Fit: The Valence of Mutual Aid and the Nature of Opportunities in the Community*

As with other human service interventions, mutual aid groups operate in a larger community context. However, the nature of the activities in which young people participate is a crucial aspect of the youth mutual aid process. If certain communities do not offer significant positive roles, then young people's potential for positive development is reduced (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005). As revealed by our interviewees, in communities in which young people have opportunities to participate only in negative activities and roles (e.g., delinquency, gang leadership), these youth may travel through the mutual aid process with identity and self-efficacy outcomes that are associated with negative types of behavior. They may even reinforce one another and develop skills that are useful in problem behavior (e.g., selling drugs). When these are the major aspects of mutual aid development, this progression can lead youth to become bonded to negative institutions (e.g., criminal gangs) instead of positive ones. In line with previous research (Harrington et al., 1996; Zhang & Messner, 1996), the interviewees' observations suggest that whether the process of mutual aid results in positive or negative behavior depends on the kind of participatory experiences available to young people. Thus, the nature of participatory opportunities and the specific roles young people experience may define the valence of mutual aid (i.e., positive versus negative), and the nature of the experiences young people have will depend, in large

part, on the community context in which they live. Social workers should therefore take heed of the developmental implications of the community context for young people. The social worker's role as it relates to environmental concerns is to help young people use available organizational and network resources and influence these environmental forces to be responsive (Ngai, 2006b). In this respect, our study indicates that mobilizing and strengthening the goodness-of-fit between mutual aid youth groups and their social environments provides social workers with a core mediating role. Within dysfunctional community contexts, the social worker's role is to empower young people to recognize the obstacles they face and to learn to communicate more openly and attain greater mutuality in their relationships (Costello & Vowell, 1999; Dornsbusch et al., 2001).

### *Further Research*

This study has several limitations. First, our results are limited to three focus groups of 15 social workers in Hong Kong whose experiences in building mutual aid networks among EBP youth may differ from those of other social workers in the same city or overseas. Hence, to increase the generalizability of this study across the social worker community in Hong Kong or in other regions, it would be especially valuable if a broader sample and more diverse range of social workers were used in a follow-up study. Future research should also examine the processes and outcomes of mutual aid youth groups from the service user perspective. Such an approach would be consistent with the recommendation made in previous studies that events should be assessed from the perspective of the person who undergoes the experience—in this case, EBP youth (e.g., Dreuth & Dreuth-Fewell, 2002).

In addition, this study focuses on key factors in group work practice that are essential to youth mutual aid. This leaves room for investigations of alternative models associated with such factors as family support or disdain for social work intervention (Cheung & Liu, 2005), psychiatric diagnoses of EBP youth (Weissman, McAvay, Goldstein, Nunes, Verdeli, & Wickramaratne, 1999), or the characteristics of service organizations (Ngai, Cheung, & Ngai, 2007). Including measures of EBP, peer acceptance and approval, participation in meaningful activities, positive recognition, mentorship, and balanced coordination (Cheung & Ngai, 2004; Cummings & Bromiley, 1996; Mok, Chueng, & Ngai, 2006; Muris, Meesters, & van den Berg, 2002; Ngai & Cheung, 2005) in the same study would also shed light on the unique contributions of these mutual aid elements to youth development. Other ways of extending this study may include launching a longitudinal study to

examine the stages of mutual aid development among EBP youth, and using surveys and in-depth interviews to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

### *Service Implications*

In spite of these limitations, this study shows the importance of mutual aid youth groups and illuminates key group work strategies that are essential to the rehabilitation of EBP youth. What makes mutual aid groups important is that young people, during their transition to adulthood, are best equipped to help one another. As Jagendorf and Malekoff (2000) observe, who better than a fellow teen to acknowledge the dignity of all adolescents, whether one has a psychiatric history or is stumbling along in the search for identity. The ability of young people to support one another is the true gift of mutual aid groups. As such, our study provides useful data for promoting the long-term development of youth mutual aid, which will eventually benefit society as a whole. Brief and transitory input from social workers is inadequate because its benefits may be short-lived. Maintaining long-term development requires enduring mutual aid among youths themselves. This study therefore helps prepare social work to meet the long-term challenge of sustainable development and advances such work beyond the level of a subsidiary individual-based service (Stoesz, 2002).

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