

Review

How Does Community Engagement Pertain to Suicide Countermeasures?

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1. What is “community engagement”?

Under the terms of the Basic Law on Suicide Countermeasures (revised in April 2016) and the General Principles of Suicide Prevention Policy (July 2017), all Japanese municipalities are required to formulate local suicide prevention plans. Given that “strengthening support for practical initiatives at the community level” is cited first among the General Principles’ priority measures, promoting steps to prevent suicide in the community is becoming one of the most important tasks that Japan’s suicide countermeasures are now facing.¹

Turning to other parts of the world, the emphasis on the community’s role in suicide prevention is also underscored in documents of the World Health Organization (WHO). “Preventing suicide: A community engagement toolkit,” which was published by WHO in 2018 and translated into Japanese by JSSC in 2019, for example, stresses the importance of promoting suicide countermeasures from the perspective of community engagement.² It cannot be said, however, that the keyword “community engagement” is still widely understood in Japan. And without being able to construe the true meaning of the term WHO uses, it is impossible to have a proper understanding of how community engagement pertains to suicide countermeasures.

If one looks up the words “community” and “engagement” in an English-Japanese dictionary, for example, and translates the term as “local efforts,” it would be potentially difficult to grasp what WHO actually means by “community engagement.” One must first understand that WHO’s real intention in

attempting to advance suicide prevention measures with this term is to promote steps in developing countries to eliminate the world’s mental health gaps.³ A “community” is not a place that presupposes an administrative district such as a city, town or village in Japan; and although it may include the concept of a geographical area, essentially, it refers to a group of people who share a common culture, values and norms, a specific population incorporated within a social structure that has developed over the history of the community⁴ (see the next section for details). Based on this correct understanding, we must consider how community engagement can be put to use in Japan’s suicide countermeasures.

2. The definition of community engagement

In order to grasp the true meaning of “community engagement,” it is important first of all to understand the definition of “community.” A clear definition, like the one as follows, is given in the WHO Health Promotion Glossary:⁴ “A specific group of people, often living in a defined geographical area, who share a common culture, values and norms, are arranged in a social structure according to relationships which the community has developed over a period of time.”

Moreover, it is essential for an understanding of the concept of “community engagement” that it is grounded on the philosophy and basic policy concepts of health promotion that WHO has been assiduously building upon since 1986. Once one realizes how the concepts of health promotion in these policy documents have changed from the time of the Ottawa Charter of 1986 to the 2016 Shanghai

1) Japan Support Center for Suicide Countermeasures (JSSC)

Declaration, we need to consider what community engagement is.

According to the definition in a WHO policy statement, “Community engagement is the process by which community benefit organizations and individuals build a long term relationship with collective vision for the benefit of the community.”⁵

Moreover, “It is primarily about the practice of moving communities towards a better change through empowerment.”⁵

“Empowerment” is also an extremely important concept in health promotion; it is defined as follows: “In health promotion, empowerment is a process through which people gain greater control over decisions and actions affecting their health.”⁴

And in order for people in a community to engage with suicide countermeasures, an advocacy experience for stakeholders in these measures becomes important.² The definition of “advocacy for health” is as follows: “A combination of individual and social actions designed to gain political commitment, policy support, social acceptance and systems support for a particular health goal or programme.”⁴

Finally, as shown in Figure 1, there are five principles in a community organization that form the basis of community engagement: fairness, justice, empowerment, participation and self-determination.⁶

Fairness
Justice
Empowerment
Participation
Self-determination

Figure 1 Principles of Community Engagement in an Organization

3. How to make the most of the concept of community engagement vis-à-vis suicide countermeasures

As stated above, community engagement is a participatory (or bottom-up) process in which the community is actively involved in promoting suicide countermeasures. In the final analysis, it should be understood as signifying the whole range of practical

activities that lead to a change for the better in a community’s suicide prevention initiatives through the self-directed involvement of the community itself. “Engagement” is a French term used in the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre⁷, and community engagement, broadly understood, can probably also be interpreted as including the meaning used in the philosophy—i.e. “making our own lives meaningful with subjectivity and taking action.”

If the definition of community engagement is properly understood, one comes to appreciate the underlying awareness that, when promoting suicide countermeasures in developing countries, which is what WHO primarily has in mind, initiatives imposed from above are ineffective, and that the community itself needs to become actively involved in promoting realistic measures based on the actual circumstances in their community.

Returning to suicide countermeasure practices in Japan, the promotion of such measures is not imposed on local communities by the national government; the municipalities themselves are required to implement measures that have a direct bearing on local residents and that are based on local suicide countermeasure plans, which each municipality draws up independently and tailors to actual local conditions. In Japan, the Basic Law on Suicide Countermeasures came into effect in 2006, and a system was established in which the national government took the lead in promoting suicide prevention measures. Although the assessment can be made that, even from an international perspective, Japan has put in place an advanced system for doing so, on the other hand, such a system also entails the risk of relegating to the background the concept of community engagement – i.e. promoting suicide countermeasures through the active involvement of local governments and community stakeholders. It is to be hoped that the need for such involvement, not only by administrative officials but also by concerned persons in workplaces, schools and nongovernmental agencies as well as ordinary citizens, will never be forgotten.

In Japan’s suicide countermeasures, too, it is thought that by advancing them in accordance with empowerment, participation and self-determination, which are the fundamental principles of community

engagement, it will lead as a result to their promotion, as those concerned intended, as measures grounded on fairness and justice.

Figure 2 shows the five principles of partnership, engagement, empowerment, complexity, comprehensiveness (PEECoC principles) that are thought to underlie the philosophy behind Japan's suicide countermeasures. Such measures will be steadily advanced through a proper understanding of these five principles.⁸

4. The relationship between community engagement and suicide countermeasures: Case studies

Up to now the discussion has focused on evaluating the concept of community engagement; this section shall show concretely how community engagement pertains to suicide countermeasures through examples from two developed countries (the United States and Northern Ireland). It will also discuss the possibility of suicide countermeasures as community engagement in the context of regional-development-type public art projects in Japan.

Partnership
Engagement
Empowerment
Complexity
Comprehensiveness

(Note) Called the PEECoC principles based on the first letters of the English words.

Scheduled to become a compulsory item in the education and training of gatekeepers involved in local suicide countermeasures proposed by the JSSC (forthcoming).

Figure 2 Five Principles Thought to Underlie Japan's Suicide Countermeasures

At present, even from an international perspective, the relationship between community engagement and suicide countermeasures is still at an embryonic stage, and the fact is that specific practical examples are few and far between. But even though community stakeholders do not have an adequate understanding of community engagement, various local suicide prevention initiatives can serve as examples of suicide countermeasures as community engagement.

The first example introduced below, a participatory public art project in the US city of Philadelphia, and

the second, the Foyle Reeds art project in Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland, are examples of outstanding suicide countermeasures undertaken for the express purpose of preventing suicide. Regional-development-type public art projects in Japan in the third example do not at present include a suicide countermeasures as a community engagement component, but by using the precedents in Philadelphia and Derry-Londonderry as references, they have the future potential for doing so.

(1) Participatory public art in the US city of Philadelphia as a form of community-building from a suicide prevention perspective

In order to reduce the stigma of suicide, the American city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania initiated a public art project in a public venue in which the general public participated.⁹ This experiment, which took place from 2011 through 2012, was planned as an art project entitled *Finding the Light Within*; specifically, a project was carried out whose main plan was to have numerous city residents take part in painting a public mural. In addition to these mural-painting activities, the project included an open studio, community paint days and the installation and dedication of the mural. It actively engaged a large number of people of diverse backgrounds and built a new community around suicide prevention. As part of this new community-building, artistic activities in which residents participated took place in a public space and included the community design and production there of a large mural about suicide. A "participatory public art" method was adopted for this project, and many members of the community actively took part in producing and publicly displaying a mural on the theme of saving human lives during time of flood. The theme was planned, among other things, to mourn the death by suicide of a Philadelphia firefighter. Completed through the participation of many local residents, this mural has been permanently installed in the city. Another aim behind the production of this mural was to raise early awareness of suicide prevention.

In addition, activities were conducted such as storytelling opportunities and art-related workshops as well as the creation of a storytelling website. These activities allowed survivors of attempted suicide to

tell their stories and share their experiences and enabled individuals and the community to talk together as a way of healing those who had just lost a loved one to suicide and helping them recover.

The aim of this project was for art to play its part in community-building, and it clearly showed how participatory public art in the context of community-building can be involved in a variety of suicide prevention activities. Although there was no quantitative evaluation of this project, a qualitative evaluation was made based on the reports of the participants. Specifically, these reports indicated the potential that participatory public art has for community-building by raising awareness about suicide prevention initiatives, reducing stigma, promoting community revitalization and offering healing to the community and to individuals in need of it. In addition, they suggest that large-scale community involvement in a healing art project has the potential to be an effective suicide countermeasure.

Removing suicide-related stigma in the community, which was as one of the goals of this project, is an important suicide countermeasure, and participatory public art seems to be something that can be useful in doing so. Participatory public art of this sort, it is believed, can have the beneficial effects of heightening an interest in and understanding of suicide prevention measures among participants (“empowerment”), strengthening human relationships and “social support” by enhancing their “sense of belonging” to the community, and improving “social connectedness” and mental health.

The important point in this case study is that participatory public art, in which ordinary residents actively engage in a project carried out as part of community-building, can serve as a suicide countermeasure. In this project, the elements of “engagement,” “participation,” “empowerment” and “self-determination” are intertwined; it also includes the standpoint of “fairness,” i.e. reinforcing social connectedness and social support and removing the stigma attached to suicide. As a result, it fosters concern in society for the socially vulnerable at high risk of suicide, for those who have attempted suicide and for those who have lost loved ones to suicide; and

it considers the possibility of bringing about social “justice” by connecting such people to specific, concrete support. These various elements fulfill the “Principles of Community Engagement in an Organization” shown in Figure 1, and are believed to be worthy to be introduced as excellent examples of suicide countermeasures as community engagement.

(2) The Foyle Reeds project in Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland

As another outstanding example of an international participatory public art project which could function as a suicide countermeasure, we can cite the efforts carried out in the city of Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland.¹⁰ Because Northern Ireland has the highest suicide rate in all of Great Britain, in 2016, a team of designers from the Royal College of Art in collaboration with the Derry-Londonderry Public Health Agency explored the possibility of promoting suicide prevention from a mental health perspective making use of public art. Specifically, these efforts resulted in the Foyle Reeds project in which 12,000 illuminated “reeds” were installed as public art on the railing of the Foyle Bridge over the river Foyle that flows through the city and that had become a high-risk area for suicides. Less than 3 meters high and extending across the entire length of the bridge, the “reeds” functioned as a public art installation but also served as a physical barrier preventing anyone from jumping off into the river. At night, the illuminated reeds change colors, an artistic effect intended to comfort the spirits of pedestrians crossing the bridge. Art and design are not a magic bullet that can produce immediate results, but mental health experts point to their potential for improving mental health by changing people’s attitudes toward the places where public art is installed. Dr. Layla McCay, the director of the Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health, explains as follows: “One theory is that installations that evoke nature can make people feel less anxious and reduce suicidal thoughts; another is that investing in places that have meaning to communities can evoke pride in a neighbourhood and can improve feelings of belonging and self-esteem. The Foyle Reeds project has elements of both of these theories.”

Although evaluating Derry-Londonderry’s public art project is a task for the future, it is regarded as an

ambitious attempt to make use of public art in conjunction with suicide countermeasures.

(3) The possibility of suicide countermeasures as community engagement for regional-development-type art projects in Japan

Efforts similar to the Philadelphia project that use participatory public art as a form of community-building have also been carried out in Japan. The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, for example, is a modern art project held every three years in Niigata Prefecture. Artworks produced through the cooperation of artists, local residents and their supporters are displayed in vacant houses and former school buildings or in the natural landscape around rural villages.¹¹ Local residents participate and engage in managing the art projects; in addition to the economic effects of regional revitalization, these community activities are believed to be energizing initiatives that contribute to suicide countermeasures by strengthening social connectedness and building social capital through the active participation of residents in volunteer activities. Unfortunately, however, at present, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale takes place within the framework of an art project and regional-development event and does not include a suicide prevention or mental health component. Since many rural communities in Niigata Prefecture are at high risk for suicide, if a suicide prevention perspective could, even in some small way, be included in these regional-development-type public art projects into which so many human and material resources are being successfully invested, they would have the potential to become a new form of local suicide countermeasure based on the philosophy of community engagement. If, for example, the relevant agencies (cultural and health services) of local governments responsible for regional development were to cooperate, regional-development-type public art projects like the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale have the potential to function as extremely effective suicide prevention initiatives.

Another example of the regional-development-type art projects taking place throughout Japan that can be cited is ART PROJECT TAKASAKI in Takasaki City, Gunma Prefecture.¹² This project makes use of empty shops along a busy street near the Japan

Railways Takasaki Station and offers city residents the opportunity to come in contact with contemporary art by converting the entire area into an art exhibit; kids workshops and other art activities in which local people can participate are also held at the same time. At present, this regional-development-type art project, too, does not incorporate a suicide countermeasure component, but it would be possible to make the most of the benefits of offering many residents the opportunity to interact widely with art and carry out activities to raise awareness about suicide prevention. By changing the date to early September (it is now held in early October), for example, plans could be devised to include a healing art project component in conjunction with World Suicide Prevention Day and Suicide Prevention Week.

Positioning Japan's regional-development-type art projects within local suicide countermeasure plans as local measures based on the philosophy of community engagement suggests the possibility of being able to further develop local steps to prevent suicide along new lines.

5. Conclusion

In the context of promoting local suicide countermeasures that require being put into daily practice in the community, this paper explains the concept of community engagement, which it is desirable that everyone involved in suicide prevention understands. Behind this concept, a correct understanding of the philosophy of health promotion, which WHO has been advancing since 1986, and the application of these ideas to the day-to-day conduct and practice of suicide prevention are thought to lead to the promotion of fruitful countermeasures. After learning about leading-edge examples of local measures based on the concept of community engagement elsewhere in the world, it is to be hoped that plans to develop such measures with this new concept will be made in Japan as well. This paper has alluded to the possibility of local suicide countermeasures in the context of regional-development-type art projects, but this is merely one suggestion. We hope that community stakeholders will devise new suicide countermeasures that they have freely thought of by themselves.

In any event, it is important to incorporate content that teaches the concepts of community engagement and health promotion in programs to train gatekeepers intended for stakeholders in suicide countermeasures and others.⁸

Additional remarks:

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