



Supporting others – Supporting oneself: Members' evaluations of supportive communication in Al-Anon mutual-aid groups



Venla Kuuluvainen*, Pekka Isotalus¹

University of Tampere, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Al-Anon is a mutual-aid group for the significant others of alcoholics. In Al-Anon, members benefit from receiving support from others as well as providing it themselves. Focusing specifically on supportive communication, this study aims to determine the elements of support Al-Anon members consider helpful in the groups and to discover why these features are considered to be helpful by group members. The data comprises member interviews and written answers that were qualitatively analysed using an inductive approach. According to the results, the core of supportive communication in the groups focuses on the conception that supporting others equals ultimately supporting oneself.

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“Giving implies to make the other person a giver also”
Erich Fromm (1956, p. 25)

1. Introduction

Communication of support has been of interest to interpersonal communication scholars for decades. Social support and mutual-aid groups are interesting arenas for the naturalistic study of supportive communication. An example of such a group is Al-Anon, which is directed to anyone suffering from someone else's drinking. Indeed, the significant others of alcoholics are known to suffer from decreased well-being (Roberts & Brent, 1982; Svenson, Forster, Woodhead, & Platt, 1995) and interpersonal problems with the alcoholic (Cullen & Carr, 1999; Hogg & Frank, 1992; Le Poire, 2004). Al-Anon has been shown to reduce group members' depressive symptoms (Rychtaric & McGillicuddy, 2005) and enhance their coping skills (Gorman & Rooney, 1979). However, the elements of supportive communication at work behind these effects are not well-defined. Hence, in this study, we utilise the theoretical perspective of supportive communication to identify those supportive elements that are evaluated as being helpful by Al-Anon members. Al-Anon features several unusual characteristics, such as a strong

ideology and interactional rules for the meetings, which makes it an interesting arena in which to investigate support. More specifically, this study reports on members' qualitative interviews and writings, thus presenting an insider's perspective on the supportive elements in Al-Anon. Further, for alcoholics' significant others, Al-Anon groups are often the only source of helpful support (Barber & Gilbertson, 1997; Copello, 2010; Itäpuisto & Selin, 2013; Orford, Velleman, Copello, Templeton, & Ibang, 2010; Zajdow, 2002). Thus, the reasons why these specific elements of supportive communication are evaluated as helpful by the group members are also examined in this study.

2. Mutual-aid groups as unique arenas for supportive communication

Generally, communication scholars have paid more attention to professionally run support groups (e.g. Cawyer & Smith-Dupre, 1995; Coulson, Buchanan, & Aubeeluck, 2007; Dennis, Kunkel, & Keyton, 2008; Peterson, 2009) than to member-run mutual-aid groups, such as Al-Anon. In contrast to support groups, mutual-aid groups usually have a strong ideological approach, are continuous and do not have a closed membership (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Schiff & Bargal, 2000). More specifically, Al-Anon is a 12-step mutual-aid group because it follows a 12-step programme and promotes the ideology that life events are determined by external forces (Cline, 1999), as well as the values of reciprocity, anonymity and self-responsibility (Zajdow, 2002). Indeed, the 12-step mutual-aid groups create an interesting context for the study

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 50 3185934.

E-mail addresses: venla.kuuluvainen@uta.fi (V. Kuuluvainen), pekka.isotalus@uta.fi (P. Isotalus).

¹ Tel.: +358 50 3605221.

of communication. Communication in Al-Anon meetings and other 12-step groups is highly structured in nature (see Al-Anon, 2013a; Ablon, 1974) and has been considered the action by which recovery is created in the groups (Arntson & Droge, 1987; Denzin, 1987). In the meetings, members take turns sharing story-like monologues of their own experiences. Others are expected to listen, and direct commenting on others' stories is forbidden. In addition to the meetings, Al-Anon offers members the opportunity to contribute to the group through voluntary work and to sponsor members who are less advanced in the programme (Zajdow, 2002). The supportive features within these 12-step groups have been investigated mostly in the social sciences (e.g. Kurtz, 1994; Levy, 1979; Lieberman, 1976; Schiff & Bargal, 2000). For example, according to Kurtz's (1994) study on mutual-aid groups, including Al-Anon, the groups enable members to open up about their feelings, gain intellectual understanding, explore coping methods and expand their social worlds. In conclusion, the purpose of this study is to view the special context of Al-Anon in the light of communication studies of supportive interactions and thus expand the supportive communication perspective to include 12-step mutual-aid groups.

Indeed, the perspective of interpersonal communication helps define the actual communication processes of mutual-aid groups apart from their working mechanisms and outcomes (cf. Schiff & Bargal, 2000; So, 2009). In other words, this perspective helps to determine the actual communication elements that aid the members of mutual-aid groups for example to explore coping mechanisms. Further, the previous research has inadequately addressed the question of why these supportive elements are considered helpful by the members of a specific mutual-aid group. In the case of Al-Anon, the question is why alcoholics' significant others judge certain supportive elements as helpful. To answer these questions, a theoretical background established on supportive communication is utilised in this study.

3. Supportive communication as a framework for the study of mutual-aid groups

In this study, communication is viewed as the mechanism through which support is conveyed in Al-Anon meetings (cf. Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, & Sarason, 1994, p. xvii). Supportive communication is defined by Burleson and MacGeorge (2002, p. 374) as "verbal and nonverbal communication produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid". Social support has several positive effects on the health of the support receiver (e.g. Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003; Callaghan and Morrissey, 1993; Cohen & Wills, 1985). However, not all supportive messages create these positive effects. Research findings on the elements affecting the perceived effectiveness of supportive communication (see Burleson, 2009; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein, & Herbert, 1992) are utilised in this study in order to understand the member's evaluations of support in Al-Anon. Three fundamental elements that are known to affect the helpfulness of support: the source, context and content of that support, are outlined next, along with their relevance to Al-Anon. Finally, the less studied subject of the benefits for the support provider is discussed.

In Al-Anon, the source of support is the other group members, who share the essence of one another's experience of life near an alcoholic. Indeed, this similarity among members has been considered one of mutual-aid groups' greatest benefits (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). Accordingly, it has been claimed that the credibility of the support provider in relation to the problem at hand affects the perceived helpfulness of that support (Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992). However, studies also show that support that is received from someone the recipient has a close relationship with is usually

preferred (Frazier, Tix, & Barnett, 2003; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1992; Uno, Unchino, & Smith, 2002). Still, in Al-Anon, the support provider is often an anonymous group member without a close relationship to the receiver. Indeed, studies suggest that when the origin of a stressful situation is perceived as abiding, people may appreciate support from others in a similar situation rather than from close acquaintances (Orford et al., 2010). All in all, mutual-aid groups such as Al-Anon make an interesting exception to the default position of interpersonal closeness within supportive relationships (cf. Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987).

In addition to the less common source of support, the contextual features of Al-Anon, such as the interactional rules, make it an otherwise unique environment in terms of supportive processes. Clearly, the setting of a support-giving situation also affects its effectiveness (Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Burleson, 2003). For instance, the safe and emotional environment of mutual-aid groups has been claimed to benefit their members (Cline, 1999; Wollert, Levy, & Knight, 1982).

In Al-Anon, the source and context of support also inevitably influence the actual content of the supportive messages delivered in the groups. Various types of supportive communication have been shown to differ in their helpfulness based on the different kinds of problem they address (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992). Emotional support, or comforting, has been generally shown to be the most beneficial support type in all kinds of situations (Burleson, 2003). Also, it has been argued that emotion-focused support is preferred when a recipient does not feel in control of his or her situation (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Cutrona & Russel, 1990). In the Al-Anon ideology, alcoholism is something that is out of the control of the significant others; in short, it is a disease. Accordingly, Kuuluvainen and Isotalus (2013) state that emotional support appears to be the most endemic type of support in Al-Anon. This is not surprising, because explicit advice-giving is forbidden in 12-step meetings (Al-Anon, 2013a). Further, studies of supportive communication show that informational support, or advice, is frequently reported as unhelpful by the recipients (e.g. Goldsmith, 2004).

In addition to the topical content of the support message, the overall quality of the message counts as well. Generally, support that does not threaten the recipient's self-esteem is perceived as helpful (Goldsmith, 1994). The quality of the supportive message can also be described according to its sophistication or person-centeredness (Burleson, 2008; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Rack, Burleson, Bodie, Holmstrom, & Servaty-Seib, 2008). According to Burleson (1994, p. 21) sophisticated supportive communication will "acknowledge, elaborate, legitimise and contextualise the feelings and perspective of a distressed other". However, in Al-Anon, direct personal commentary on others' stories, and thus direct verbal support, is not allowed. Indeed, the support provided in the groups has been described as being conveyed indirectly through members' stories, which are referred by Ablon (1974) as "education by alternatives".

The elements affecting support effectiveness described above illustrate the recipient's view. That is, although the positive impact that providing support has for the provider is also recognised in the field of supportive communication, it has been less studied. However, the study of mutual-aid groups suggests that supporting others is a fundamental mechanism through which recovery is created in these groups (Kurtz, 2004; Riessman, 1965). Thus, the perspective of the support provider is also examined in this study. In fact, it has been argued that providing support to others could be even more beneficial than receiving it (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003; Väänänen, Buuk, Kivimäki, Pentti, & Vantera, 2005). Moreover, it has been argued that it is important for the support receiver to be able to provide support in return (Liang, Krause, & Bennet, 2001; Robinson & Tian, 2009), even to someone other

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