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

Venla Kuuluvainen*, Pekka Isotalus 1

University of Tampere, Finland

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A B S T R A C T
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, & Ibanga, 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 & Gotlib, 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...
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 (Armstrong & 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 commentary 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, & Vanera, 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
than the individual the initial support was received from (Gouldner, 1960).

To conclude, Al-Anon has several features that appear unusual or even contradictory to the default characteristics of support-giving situations: support comes from anonymous group members, the context is governed by the 12-step ideology, the content of support is influenced by the group practises and the support provision perspective is recognised. In sum, mutual-aid groups appear as compelling subjects in the study of supportive communication and vice versa, supportive communication provides a practical framework in order to understand mutual-aid groups. This is also where the vigour of this study derives from.

4. Design and method

Al-Anon groups feature several unusual characteristics as compared to everyday supportive interactions. However, for many people living with alcoholics, Al-Anon has proved to be a source of helpful support. Therefore, in the light of the theoretical background established on supportive communication, the first aim of this study is to discover the elements of support in Al-Anon evaluated as helpful by group members. Both the views of a support recipient as well as a provider are considered. The first research question is:

RQ1. What elements of supportive communication in Al-Anon are evaluated as helpful by group members?

In order to understand the alcoholics' significant others' special needs for support, the second aim of this study is to examine why these specific features are judged as helpful by the members. Hence, the second research question is:

RQ2. Why are these elements of supportive communication in Al-Anon evaluated as helpful by group members?

The research materials comprise 169 written responses from Finnish Al-Anon members to an open question in a questionnaire and the transcriptions of 20 interviews. Of the members of Finnish Al-Anon groups, 97% are women and 76% are partners of alcoholics (for more statistical information, see Al-Anon, 2013b). The questionnaire was first sent to all Al-Anon groups through the Al-Anon central service in the spring of 2012. For the purposes of this study, answers to one specific question (“What in the other group members’ support is most important to you considering your coping?”) were used as data. From the 188 returned questionnaires, 169 respondents had answered this question. Of the respondents, 164 were women, 4 were men and 1 was unidentified. Other information about the respondents is presented in Table 1.

The questionnaire data were tentatively analysed in order to create a base for the interviews. Four themes derived from the analysis were used as the interview frame: atmosphere, other group members, sharing, and others' experiences. In addition, more general questions about members' experiences in Al-Anon were included to the interview frame. After that, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author. The aim of the interviews was to gain more detailed descriptions of the support in the meetings and explanations about the specific features' significance. The interviewees were recruited with the help of the Al-Anon central service. All of the interviewees were women who were 34 years to 78 years old (avg. 59 years) and had been members of Al-Anon between 10 months to 45 years (avg. 10 years). Nineteen of the interviewees had or had had an alcoholic partner. One had other relatives suffering from alcoholism. The interviews lasted from 1 to 1.5 h and generated 240 pages of written transcriptions (Times New Roman, 12-point, single-spaced). The interviews took place in the interviewees' homes, on Al-Anon premises, on private university premises and in public libraries.

The interview data were analysed inductively using thematic analysis (Richards, 2005) with the help of Nvivo computer software (see Bazeley, 2007). The questionnaire data were also included in this final analysis. That is, the data from the interviews and the questionnaire were treated as an aggregate in the final analysis. In practice, the questionnaire data featured more abstract concepts, such as “peer support” and “good atmosphere”, and the interview data more detailed explanations of how these concepts appear in the groups' communication and why they are helpful. The analysis began by developing preliminary codes. As the coding proceeded, the created codes were incorporated under categories that were more abstract and the level of abstraction was progressively raised. At the same time, the developed codes were broken down into more detailed subcategories in which the level of specificity was increased. Throughout the analysis, the created codes were audited and the versions of the coding scheme were tested with new data. If a code was vague, overlapped with another code, was under the wrong upper category or was difficult to use for any other reason, it was redefined, merged with another code or moved. That is, although the resulting themes represent the same phenomenon and are so clearly related to one another, they aim to describe essentially different elements constructing this phenomenon.

5. Results

The results provided four themes representing the elements evaluated as helpful by Al-Anon members: support network, support source, support situation and support form. These themes describe different aspects of Al-Anon's supportive communication. Nevertheless, the underlying premise behind all these themes appears in the expression “supporting others supports oneself.” The themes are described in detail here and are supported with quotations translated from Finnish to English. Interviewees’ and respondents’ identification number and age/age group are in parentheses.

5.1. Support network: a positive community as an answer to feelings of otherness

In members' accounts, Al-Anon manifested as a positive network of people to which members can belong. Participating in Al-Anon was portrayed as an indication of courage to discuss difficult matters openly. It appeared that, through communication in Al-Anon, an issue that has been previously something to be ashamed of is transformed into a positive “emblem” of belonging. This was important because many of the alcoholics' significant others suffer from low self-esteem. Furthermore, it was proudly disclosed that being part of the Al-Anon community could be seen through members' speech, which features a special language only understandable to those inside the Al-Anon community. One member talked about the importance of belonging:

“Everyone should have a place that this is my place and this is where I belong, this is . . . well, I think that the group, I belong to that group.” (Interview 19, 63)

Additionally, the significant others of alcoholics were told to suffer from the lack of a functional communicative network at home. As an answer to this, it was explained that the communication in Al-Anon is the complete opposite, a “healthy family”, of the distorted communication in the home. Experiencing a functional way of communicating was important for the members because their personal relationships were often garbled. Furthermore, the communication in Al-Anon was positively contrasted with that in other communities, such as work-related occasions.
In addition to the sense of belonging, Al-Anon offers a concrete chance for company. This was expressed to be important, because the alcoholics’ significant others are often lonely and live in isolation. This was simply expressed by one questionnaire answerer:

“Now I have friends. I used to be all alone.” (Questionnaire 59, over 60)

Additionally, the importance of merely knowing that support is available was noted. For instance, members give their personal phone numbers to newcomers and encourage them to call at any time.

Although some members interacted with each other also outside the meetings, it was emphasised that there is no pressure to establish relationships. That is, because the members are often emotionally exhausted when they arrive to the group they do not have to waste energy to develop friendships. For example, one interviewee (3, 34) referred to her fellow group members as her “tennis friends”; they were friends she met once a week for the specific purpose and nothing more. Indeed, the group as a whole was seen as the primary unit. For instance, members do not communicate their personal relationships in the meetings in order to prevent cliques. However, the contradiction of disclosing one’s deepest secrets while maintaining anonymity was also confusing. For instance, one interviewee (5, 61) recounted feeling baffled after greeting a fellow group member outside Al-Anon who did not return her “hello”.

In conclusion, Al-Anon as a positive community, appears to hold an answer to the loneliness, isolation and feelings of shame and low self-esteem that characterise the problems of alcoholics’ significant others.

5.2. Support source: member parity as an answer to feelings of inferiority

As all the members are peers, egalitarianism appeared to prevail in Al-Anon and this also applies to the communication practices in the groups. For example, all decisions were explained to be made in consensus, which is reached through equal discussion with even the quietest members’ opinions noted. Further, equality is maintained by allowing members equal time to talk. These practices were seen as a way to prevent members from falling back on their typical and unequal conversational roles. Additionally, support from similar others averts the top-down approach of professionals. This was considered important in that feelings of being miscomprehended or inferior, which are common among the alcoholics’ significant others, do not hinder the support. This was described as follows:

“If I was in a group where there was an outsider as a leader, then I don’t know if I would rebel anymore, but I certainly would have rebelled in the beginning: “Who the hell you think you are coming here to tell us how to recover?”” (Interview 17, 42)

In addition, the equality among members enabled them to move between the roles of victim and supporter. Indeed, members took pride in being able to help others. For example, one interviewee (16, 56) discussed how she had recently started receiving telephone calls for support from those who had recently joined the group. The ability to give support to others was an indicator of one’s own recovery.

Member equality was also seen as crucial, because it is the ultimate mechanism through which Al-Anon groups function. That is, it is the responsibility of the members who have received help from the group to provide it to those who are in need now. The most obvious form of helping others is service work, such as working as an area delegate or simply making coffee in the meetings. Service work was explained to be important for alcoholics’ partners because it teaches members to take responsibility for their own well-being (instead of the alcoholic’s) by contributing to the mutual good.

The similar experiences also appeared to make all members equally reliable sources of information and support. This was important because the alcoholics’ significant others often have difficulties in trusting others. Although the “old-timers” are especially listened to, it was emphasised that the newcomers’ insights are equally important because the groups are maintained via reciprocity. In addition, the similarity among the members was explained to generate a special understanding that could not be received anywhere else, as illustrated by one member:

“Sometimes, you only have to say half a word to get understood. The experiences are so similar.” (Questionnaire 56, 31–40)

In summary, the member similarity attenuates feelings of inferiority, inequality and miscomprehension. In addition, this equality enables and obligates everyone to take responsibility for supporting others. In short, one’s own recovery stems from being able to help others.

5.3. Support situation: premises for support as an answer to the taboo nature of alcoholism in society

The meetings were explained to provide a concrete occasion devoted to talk about the subject. This was considered important because alcoholism is a taboo, and so, it is not openly discussed in society. Because of this, methods of obtaining support are scarce for the alcoholics’ significant others. Additionally, it was noted that the meetings offered a “breathing brake” from the alcoholic home life. Although few pondered whether they needed to perpetually attend the meetings, continuous participation was considered important so that a relapse into old-habits would be prevented. Al-Anon was also compared positively to therapy because it had the benefits of voluntariness and being free of charge. Above all, the mere knowledge of the existence of Al-Anon groups was emphasised, as in this citation:

“I know that they (the group) meet every week at the same time and that they are always there, there is always someone there. I even went there on Christmas Day.” (Interview 9, 48)

In addition to providing a concrete place for support, the meetings appeared to feature an advantageous atmosphere for supportive communication, which was described as peaceful, loving, discharged, warm and sincere. Also, nonverbal communication
appeared to play a part in constructing the atmosphere needed for supportive processes. Members emphasised the importance of smiling, hugging, ways of looking to one another, nodding as an indication of understanding, touching the person sharing comfortably on the back and so on. This atmosphere is also constructed before and after the meetings, as well as during breaks. This was portrayed as a time when the atmosphere is lighter, including chatting, coffee making, hellos and goodbyes to counterbalance the meetings’ intense atmosphere. These are also occasions when members can discuss their problems more freely and more direct support can be communicated.

The positive atmosphere also appeared to result from the topics discussed in the meetings. The interactional rules were explained to keep the communication “real” and prevent it from becoming superficial. This was explained to be important so that the process of recovering would evolve. That is, small talk would shift the emphasis of the communication from “the subject” to develop relationships. Additionally, the atmosphere is maintained positive through considering other group members in one’s floors. Thus, it was stated that the stories shared should address the 12-step programme and themselves, not the alcoholic, in order to benefit the group. In fact, talking about the alcoholic’s undertakings was considered an indicator of being in an early stage of recovery. The manner of sharing in turns also gives members time to construct their comments in a way that they can contribute to the common good.

The positive atmosphere was explained as especially important because the significant others of alcoholics are often sensitive to rejection. The self-sustaining mechanism for this positive atmosphere seemed to be the fact that those attending the groups genuinely endorse the notion of reciprocity and communicate accordingly. This sincerity that characterises the atmosphere in the meetings was told to manifest itself in the ways in which members share their deepest secrets without falsehoods. Additionally, not placing blame on others was considered particularly important in the creation of an accepting atmosphere. That is, the alcoholics’ significant others were explained to be imbued with guilt and bad advice, so the meetings ought to be free of accusations. Acceptance was considered a primary condition for the members’ open sharing.

Accordingly, the safety of the meetings’ atmosphere was stressed. In addition to the approving climate, the feeling of safety was described to be created through the foreseeable trajectory of the meetings, the familiar premises and the rule-governed manner of communicating. The safe atmosphere was explained to be important for the alcoholics’ significant others, especially for the newcomers, because their home life is often unpredictable. This was described by one member as follows:

“If you have, you know, suffered for a long time and you’re scared and then you go alone to that table: ‘Oh, now it’s my turn and I should say something’, it is almost a panic situation because you are already otherwise confused. So it is very important that the atmosphere is safe.” (Interview 18, 63)

Accordingly, members considered ways to make new members feel welcome, such as acknowledging newcomers in their floors. Additionally, the aspiration to create a safe atmosphere was apparent in the way conflict was handled in the meetings. Indeed, the interviewees recounted incidents in which conflict appeared between a few members but the situation resolved quickly because others did not take any part in it.

To summarise, Al-Anon meetings provide a tangible as well as a psychological space for supportive processes. This kind of safe space is important because alcoholics’ significant others are often fearful and unable to talk about the subject anywhere else. The positive atmosphere of the meetings is built on the notion that one’s recovery depends on the group’s well-being.

5.4. Support form: experience sharing as an answer to the complexity of the members’ problems

The open sharing in the meetings was portrayed as a way to “change one’s story”. Indeed, it was explained that because the significant others’ situations are often complicated and no magic solutions exist, this storytelling promotes one’s own processing. Sharing aloud is a way to access and appreciate one’s feelings. When said aloud, issues are put in the correct proportions. Additionally, being heard and listened to allows others to take a piece of one’s burden to bear. Additionally, it was expressed that sharing aloud is a method of genuine participation that indicates a true will to recover.

In general, the point of sharing is to change one’s situational appraisal. This was considered to be important because the significant others often have distorted views of their circumstances. For example, humour and laughter were seen important in pointing out the silliness of a member’s own actions. Additionally, talking openly about one’s experiences enables others to react with expressions of encouragement and validation as the members refer to one another during their turns to speak. This sharing was also described as a way to obtain feedback on one’s own recovery process because the other group members are the only ones who can point out the milestones accomplished. It was considered important that there are members in different phases of recovery because this allows different perspectives to be heard.

Consequently, “learning to talk” was reckoned as important function in the meetings. As many of the significant others are insecure, the skill of talking was explained to enhance members’ self-esteem and equip them to talk also in other occasions. In particular, the skill to form one’s story in such a way that it would benefit others was noted.

Likewise, the form of interaction in the meetings was explained to teach the art of listening. The salience of genuinely listening to everyone was noted, as others’ stories were seen as important sources of insight. Even so, it was noted that one does not have to agree with everyone. Above all, others’ stories were seen as mirrors by which one’s own situation can be reflected upon. Others’ stories also work as a benchmark to which one’s own experiences and progress of recovery can be compared to. Indeed, it was explained that because the significant others are often preoccupied with the alcoholics’ actions, others’ stories help members to see themselves from an outsider’s perspective and move the spotlight from the alcoholic to the member. Furthermore, others’ experiences help members find words for their feelings, as explained by one interviewee:

“She said the exact thing that I had been thinking about but wasn’t able to say it so well, or bring it, transform to words. I only had the feeling.” (Interview 20, 63)

Besides a new perspective, others’ stories were considered sources of knowledge. In addition to philosophies of life, the stories function as examples of practical ways of thinking and behaving as well as resolving problems. For example, one member (2, 51) stated that after others had shared the ways in which they pampered themselves, she felt she had gained validation to do it herself. However, the importance of not explicitly trying to influence others was deemed important. Indeed, in contrast to quick fixes, the problems of significant others were portrayed as calling for a profound change in a member’s comprehension.

Listening to similar experiences was also considered important because alcoholics’ significant others often think their experiences are unique. Above all, others’ stories give members hope. Even the disclosing of setbacks indicates to others that everyone makes mistakes and that people can move past them. In fact, the sharing of one’s incompleteness was explained to indicate that the member
has grasped the programme and, paradoxically, is recovering. Hope is also demonstrated in that no matter how horrible the experiences shared are, the old-timers describe them in a serene manner. The importance of the meetings in generating hope was described as follows: “I don’t think, that even if I had had all the books about Al-Anon, about an alcoholic family, about alcoholism, those wouldn’t get me to (…) it needs the dialogue with others and that one can hear others’ stories and the ways they have survived (…) thus if in the beginning there wouldn’t have been the light in the end of the tunnel, who the hell would continue going there?” (Interview 17, 42)

In conclusions, the experience sharing in the meetings exposes one’s story to change and provides an opportunity to support others. This form of communication was considered important in order to respect members’ own processing of the complicated issue. Reciprocal sharing as a form of support is also engaged in the construction of the first three supportive elements in Al-Anon: the network, source and situation of support.

6. Discussion

According to the results, the four core elements of supportive communication in Al-Anon are the supportive network in which to belong, the equal group members as support sources, suitable premises for support and the form of this support, which generates personal processing. The underlying philosophy apparent in these four themes is that the good of others is the good of oneself. Furthermore, the reasons that these specific elements were considered helpful illustrated the members’ understanding of the essence of alcoholics’ significant others’ problems, such as feelings of otherness and inferiority; the complexity of these problems and alcoholism as a taboo in society. Hence, what can we learn from these results in order to support alcoholics’ significant others?

First, the very dynamics of the relationship between an alcoholic and a significant other often results in the partner’s seclusion from social networks (Orford et al., 2010). Consequently, the significant others have often low-self esteem (Wiseman, 1991). This was also why the members felt it is important for the alcoholics’ significant others to be part of a community in which the reality of otherness is reconstructed, through communication, into a source of connecting and positive change. Following the typologies of support, this kind of support is social network support (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Social network support includes making the receiver feel as belonging to the community (Cobb, 1979) as well as offering concrete possibility for companionship (Braithwaite, Valdrón, & Finn, 1999). In the case of Al-Anon, the messages of belonging appear as generally implicit and located in between other supportive messages, such as esteem support messages. That is, portraying Al-Anon as a desirable community is also a way to strengthen the members’ sense of belonging. Moreover, “fitting in” appeared easy in Al-Anon, as the relational aspect in the communication is diminished. Hence, these results show that the support of weak-tie networks (see Adelman et al., 1987) may be especially beneficial in some occasions.

Second, because the groups are not focused on relationships, member parity is essential to the groups’ supportive processes. Thus, the messages delivered by peers are heard without the distraction of unequal statuses. It has been found that the perceived expertise of the support provider affects evaluations of the support’s helpfulness (Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992). In that fashion, the members appeared to prefer personal experience over professional knowledge. It has also been suggested that as the problem at hand is abiding, support from similar others may be preferred over support from close relations (Orford et al., 2010). In addition, the equal statuses enable the members to reciprocate support.

Third, Al-Anon offers a concrete opportunity for the supportive processes which is important to alcoholics’ significant others because the problem is often unspoken in the outside world. Similarly, according to Burleson and Goldsmith (1998), the right conditions for supportive processes are created through mutual trust between the support giver and the recipient, a sense of safety in discussing difficult matters, the ability to discuss the subject logically and the feeling of comfort in the situation. Moreover, the prolific atmosphere has been previously reported as the most important element for creating recovery in mutual-aid groups (Cline, 1999). The support in Al-Anon is also free of deadlines or preconditions. This is important because recovery rarely happens overnight (e.g. Zajdow, 2002).

Interestingly, nonverbal communication, especially active listening, appeared to play a role in creating a positive atmosphere in the meetings. Nonverbal immediacy and, more recently active listening have been considered important forms of supportive communication (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Jones & Guerrero, 2001; Virtanen & Isotalus, 2013). Thus, these results support the notion that listening is also an important form of support, although this is likely culturally influenced (see Virtanen & Isotalus, 2013). Moreover, active listening can simultaneously perform the action of receiving support.

Finally, in this context, the act of sharing of one’s difficult experiences can be seen as communication of support. This duality is built into the Al-Anon philosophy, and it is also the mechanism via which the groups are ultimately held together (cf. Zajdow, 2002). Consequently, in order to boost one’s own recovery, the support given to others must be as good as possible. Not directly commenting on each other’s stories and not giving advice can be seen as ways of keeping the support polite and face-saving. Indeed, this kind of support is perceived as helpful because it does not threaten the support recipient’s self-image (see Goldsmith, 1994, 2004) or include uncomfortable advice (see Feng, 2009; Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Buder, 2004). This is important because the alcoholics’ significant others’ problems are profoundly complex in nature, thus making unequivocal guidance dubious. Moreover, emotional support has been reported to be the most beneficial type of support when the recipient’s problem in insoluble (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Likewise, according to Burleson and Goldsmith (1998), if the situation causing the stress itself cannot be changed, the support should aim to change the support receiver’s appraisal of the situation. In contrast to that, however, several studies on Internet support groups report informational support to be the most endemical support type (e.g., Alexander, Peterson & Hollishead, 2003; Coulson et al., 2007; Coursaris & Liu, 2009; Mo & Coulson, 2008). This may be due to the lack of nonverbal cues in computer-mediated communication that primarily convey emotionally supportive messages (see Jones & Guerrero, 2001).

Further, the results show that the supportive messages in the meetings can be considered generally discreet (cf. Kuuluvainen & Isotalus, 2013). This echoes Burleson’s & MacGeorge’s (2002) notion of sophisticated or person-centred messages. However, the person-centeredness of the support in Al-Anon appears more implicit and manifests in the adherence to the meeting rules and in the role of listening as support.

To summarise, based on the results of this study and the perspective of supportive communication, Al-Anon, as a mutual-aid group, appears to be an aggregate of appropriate elements of supportive communication. Interestingly, the members seemed to knowingly endorse the idea that the ideology of reciprocity is practically executed through communication because they explicated the meaning of talking and listening skills and the interactional rules. Thus, above all, it is the communication of support in the
groups that embodies the Al-Anon worldview. This deduction leads us to three main conclusions, which will be outlined next.

Our first main conclusion is that the roles of the provider, receiver and seeker of support are intermingled in Al-Anon. That is, the possibility to reciprocate can be seen as inbuilt in the group practises. Reciprocity has been reported as an important factor in supportive processes (e.g. Liang et al., 2001). This result accentuates also the importance of considering the relationship in which supportive processes take place. In mutual-aid groups, the members’ parity (in addition to the ideology) creates a strong norm of reciprocity. Even those who have more recently joined the group have the opportunity to support the first-timers. According to Goldsmith (2004), this kind of role diffusion is beneficial because it does not generate a power asymmetry between the one having and giving support and the one lacking and obtaining it. Moreover, the results of this study shed light on the perspective of the support provider. The point is that when providing support, the provider does not give something away but actually constructs something that she or he is also a part of. The thing that is constructed together with the receiver can be, for instance, their mutual relationship or the well-being of a mutual-aid group.

Further, these results show that the actions of providing, receiving and seeking support are simultaneous in the groups. In their stories, members express their own need for support in order to support others. Additionally, listening to others is a way to support the one sharing as well as receive support. Hence, future research would benefit from studying supportive interactions as whole instead of making clear-cut divisions between providing, receiving and seeking support. The benefits of providing support also have great pragmatic implications for healthcare services (cf. Brown et al., 2003; Post, 2005).

The second main conclusion is that the process of supportive communication in Al-Anon is a sum of several variables. Hence, the context of support should be recognised. Indeed, in addition to the role diffusion between the providers and receivers of support, the actual communication of support in Al-Anon was influenced by features such as the 12-step ideology, egalitarian community and the group practices. However, the contextual features affecting supportive processes are rarely studied (Burleson, 2009). Naturalistic research on supportive communication has great potential in helping us to understand the contextual effects and especially the synergism of those effects. From a naturalistic point of view, the complexity of the support-giving situation follows the recently developed dual-process model (see Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012; Burleson, 2006, 2009), which suggests that the effectiveness of support is determined by the co-operation of the message quality and several contextual factors.

The third conclusion is that the support in Al-Anon manifests not only as the specific messages exchanged but also as an arena in which one can experience being a functional member of a community through interaction with others. Because the members are not able to take their usual conversational roles and the norms of relationship development are diminished, the opportunity to reform one’s self-image and “rehearse” building healthy relationships appears. This possibility is also free of blame or interpersonal rewards, which fosters the members’ willingness to help and strengthens their sense of responsibility. This sort of processing has the potential to create a more profound change, which is presumably important when the problems at hand are complex and overriding.

Furthermore, communicating support in Al-Anon group is a process in which an individual can see how one’s communication is received, thus providing feedback on who one is. Hence, the support in Al-Anon is not about saying “you are fine”, but it is about establishing an environment in which members can act fine by supporting others. In this way, the members can feel that they possess power over the surrounding situation through communication. Similar process is often referred to as empowerment (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Christens, 2012; Rodwell, 1996). It also echoes the Al-Anon ideology that one can only change one’s self. Indeed, alcoholics’ significant others’ problems have been thought to lie within their unsuccessful aspirations to control the alcoholic’s actions (e.g. Duggan, Dailey, & Le Poire, 2006; Hogg & Frank, 1992; Le Poire, 1994).

The limitations of this study include the likelihood that those participating in the research have benefited from Al-Anon and thus are unlikely to talk about it negatively. However, this partiality is also a characteristic of the groups in general, thus the ones participating are likely the ones who experience it positively. In other words, the ones with negative experiences choose not to participate. This imposes a great challenge for research in general: how to reach those not being supported? The second limitation is that the communication in the groups was examined through retrospective self-reports. It has been noted that people may misremember communicational events (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Even so, the benefit of self-reports is that they capture the perspectives of the individuals who have actually experienced the situation examined (Kennedy, Humphreys, & Borkman, 1994) and therefore enable the contextual elements to be taken into account. To conclude, despite these limitations, mutual-aid groups such as Al-Anon constitute a compelling framework for the study of supportive communication, and supportive communication forms a useful means for the study of mutual-aid groups.

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