

VENLA KUULUVAINEN

# Supportive Communication in Al-Anon Mutual-aid Groups

The background of the cover features a collection of blue, semi-transparent spheres of various sizes. These spheres are scattered across the white background, with some appearing in the foreground and others receding into the distance, creating a sense of depth. The spheres have a slightly textured surface, resembling bubbles or small planets.



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Supportive Communication  
in Al-Anon Mutual-aid Groups



ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

To be presented, with the permission of  
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VENLA KUULUVAINEN

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# FOREWORD

The possibility of recovering from difficult experiences and making positive changes in human lives has always intrigued me. In this dissertation, I had the privilege to study this phenomenon. I feel, that the two most important things that I learned are first, that the most salient change that can happen is an inner change of perspective. For me, this dissertation made that wisdom come truly alive. The second learning is, that one does not have to merely wait for that change to occur. Instead, there is a key to making a change: communication. This means that one can solicit a change by engaging in supportive communication with others and also put that change into practice in communication. I believe that these two lessons taught by this research will help me tremendously in life. I can only hope that after reading this dissertation, the reader can come to the same conclusions.

In addition to these two wisdoms, this dissertation has clearly taught me a great deal about conducting research in the field of speech communication. In this learning process, the one person I would like to give special thanks is Professor Pekka Isotalus, my supervisor for this dissertation. Pekka is also the greatest progenitor for this research as he approached me approximately six years ago in May 2010 with the idea of doctoral studies. Pekka's way of always encouraging and pushing me forward has been very important for me and this dissertation would not have been completed without his help.

My sincerest thanks also go to all the other great minds at the School of Communication, Media and Theatre at the University of Tampere, with whom I have had the privilege of working with during these years of writing this dissertation. Two wise ladies, Maija Gerlander and Tuula-Riitta Välikoski, deserve special gratitude as they have been true role models for me in the field of speech communication. I also thank all the participants of the doctoral seminar of speech communication for the interesting discussions that helped me improve my writings. I especially want to thank Ira Virtanen who has been my guide and mentor in the fascinating world of supportive communication during these years. Special thanks go also to Maija Peltola, together with whom I have explored about the exiting world of research.

I especially want to thank one fellow doctoral student, Johanna Mäkelä, who has been an invaluable source of support and solace in every step of this sometimes

bumpy journey. I could not have come this far without all the discussions and, especially, the giggles and joking that we have shared during these years.

In addition, I want to thank the doctoral school of communication studies, VITRO, for making it possible to conduct my dissertation research full-time and organising thought-productive seminars that have helped develop my research. I also want to thank the fellow VITRO students for sharing the pains and joys of writing a dissertation. I thank Tampere University Foundation for the grant that made it possible for me to begin my research and the city of Tampere for helping me with publishing costs.

Special thanks go also to University Lecturer Leena Mikkola and Research Professor Marja Holmila for a thoughtful pre-examination of this dissertation. Their valuable comments helped develop the dissertation into its final form.

I also want to express my deepest gratitude to Al-Anon and the participants of this research for giving me such a warm welcome as a researcher and acknowledging that the subject of my research is important.

As noted, this dissertation took its first steps six years ago. However, before these steps were a whole lot of love that have built the bedrock of accomplishing a thing such as a dissertation in the first place. I feel that because my mum Jaana and dad Timo have always believed in me, I have believed in myself. In addition to the love and support, my mother as speech communication teacher and father as forest researcher have also helped me with concrete questions regarding the issues of doing this dissertation. I want to thank my dad and his partner Tuija for the insightful conversations about the academic world over dinners in Torpparinmäki and my mother for being a real mentor in the field of speech communication. I also want to thank Oona, my little sister, for taking me out once in a while to remind me that there exists a world beyond this dissertation.

My extended family, especially my grandparents Roosa, Yrjänä, Pirkko and Eero deserve special thanks for always being proud of me. Special thanks go also to my unofficial grandfather Pertti, who has always showed special interest in this research and encouraged me to take over the world!

This dissertation would not have been completed without my friends. Viisikko, including Sanni, Annukka, Johanna and Outi deserve special thanks for all the deep (and sometimes less deep) discussions that have helped me understand this world and thus, the issues of this dissertation a bit better. Also, Muusa, Mari and my cousin Elina have been of great support during these years. I also thank my hairy friend Matti for being my loyal assistant in the home office for all these years. My sincerest thanks go to Katriina, with whom I have engaged in mind-blowing discussions that in addition to helping me with the research, have made me a better human being. As a special acknowledgement, I want to dedicate this book to my friends.

Finally, the one person that I don't even find words for thanking is my boyfriend, cohabitant and best friend Oltsi, who has always been there for me. During the years of writing this dissertation, we have truly grown together and I could not be more thankful for that.

In the spring-like, beautiful Helsinki, 11.4. 2016

Venla Kuuluvainen





# ABSTRACT

Friends and family of alcoholics are known to suffer from interpersonal problems with the alcoholic, and attending meetings with a mutual-aid group is one way of coping with this difficult relationship. This dissertation is located in the field of speech communication and concentrates on the communication of social support, that is, supportive communication, in Al-Anon mutual aid-groups directed towards the friends and family of alcoholics. The aim is to comprehensively understand the elements and functions of supportive communication in the context of Al-Anon.

This dissertation adopts the theoretical perspective of supportive communication to meet this aim and composes of four peer-reviewed articles, each focusing on four elements of supportive communication in Al-Anon. The objective of the first sub-study was to detect the types of supportive communication in the context of Al-Anon meetings. The second sub-study strived to understand the members' views on the elements of helpful support in Al-Anon. In the third sub-study, the focus turns to the helping mechanisms of supportive communication in Al-Anon and finally, the fourth sub-study aimed at describing the effects that Al-Anon attendance had on members' communication in romantic relationships with the alcoholic.

To meet these aims, this dissertation builds on interpretivism and thus, utilises qualitative research methodology. The research materials were collected through observations at the Al-Anon meetings, interviews with Al-Anon members and a questionnaire. The gathered data were thematically analysed.

Following from the four aims, the results of the dissertation show that, first, Al-Anon features emotional, informational, social network and esteem support. In addition, the first sub-study revealed how the contextual elements of Al-Anon, such as the groups' ideological foundations, affected the communication of support in the meetings. According to the second sub-study, the members of Al-Anon evaluated four elements of Al-Anon's support as especially helpful. These elements were the positive community of Al-Anon as the support network, peers as the support source, Al-Anon premises as the support situation and personal sharing in the meetings as the support form. Addressing the third aim, the third sub-study revealed that the helping mechanisms of Al-Anon are produced by generating situational reappraisals that operate at the content and relationship levels of

supportive communication. Finally, the results of the fourth sub-study indicated that the supportive communication in Al-Anon helped the partners of alcoholics change their communication in the relationship with the alcoholic. These changes included the partners' way of moving away from controlling tendencies and displaying co-dependency to acceptance and the drawing of boundaries. These changes in the partners' communication also affected the partners' view of the relationship status. As an aggregate, the results provide a comprehensive model of the supportive communication process in Al-Anon. The model helps understand the functions of the different elements of supportive communication as well as their mutual relationships in Al-Anon.

The discussion chapter presents the interactional and contextual essence of supportive communication in Al-Anon and thus brings new light to elements other than the message content that affect the support's helpfulness. This discussion includes focusing on the indirect forms of supportive communication in Al-Anon that can essentially be seen as existing through the contextual and interactional meanings of support. In addition, the relationship level of supportive communication in Al-Anon, as it is generated through these more indirect forms of support, is also discussed in detail. Furthermore, the effects of supportive communication on relationships other than that between the support provider and receiver is discussed as the observation sheds new light on the long-term relational outcomes of supportive communication. Finally, the benefits of utilising the theoretical framework of supportive communication to study mutual-aid groups are discussed.

*Key words:* interpersonal communication, supportive communication, mutual-aid group, friends and family of alcoholics, Al-Anon

# TIIVISTELMÄ

## Supporttiivinen viestintä Al-Anon-vertaistukiryhmissä

Alkoholistien läheiset kärsivät usein interpersonaalisen viestinnän ongelmista suhteessaan alkoholistin kanssa. Osallistuminen vertaistukiryhmään on yksi keino selvitä vaikeassa suhteessa alkoholin liikakäyttäjän kanssa. Tämä puheviestinnän väitöskirja tarkastelee sosiaalisen tuen viestintää eli supporttiivista viestintää alkoholistien läheisille tarkoitetuissa Al-Anon-vertaistukiryhmissä. Tutkimuksen päätarkoituksena on ymmärtää kokonaisvaltaisesti supporttiivisen viestinnän eri elementtejä ja niiden funktioita Al-Anon-vertaistukiryhmien kontekstissa.

Tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään supporttiivisen viestinnän teoreettista taustaa, ja se koostuu neljästä vertaisarvioidusta artikkelista, jotka kaikki keskittyvät Al-Anonin supporttiivisen viestinnän eri elementteihin. Ensimmäisen osatutkimuksen tavoitteena on kartoittaa Al-Anonin ryhmäpalavereissa esiintyviä supporttiivisen viestinnän tyyppisiä sekä Al-Anonin kontekstitekijöiden vaikutusta palavereissa tapahtuvaan supporttiiviseen viestintään. Toisessa osatutkimuksessa pyritään ymmärtämään Al-Anonin jäsenten näkemyksiä siitä, millaisista elementeistä hyödylliseksi koettu tuki muodostuu Al-Anonissa. Kolmas artikkeli pyrkii ymmärtämään supporttiivisen viestinnän mekanismeja Al-Anonissa. Neljännen osatutkimuksen tarkoituksena on kuvata alkoholistien kumppaneiden näkemyksiä siitä, mitä seurauksia Al-Anonin supporttiivisellä viestinnällä on heidän omalle viestinnälleen suhteessa alkoholistin kanssa.

Näihin tavoitteisiin pyritään käyttämällä tulkitsevaa tutkimusotetta ja laadullisia tutkimusmenetelmiä. Väitöskirjan tutkimusaineistot kerättiin havainnoimalla Al-Anonin palavereita, haastatteleamalla Al-Anonin jäseniä sekä kyselylomakkeen avulla. Kerätyt aineistot analysoitiin temaattisesti.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat ensinnäkin, että Al-Anonin palavereissa esiintyy emotionaalista, tiedollista, sosiaalisten verkostojen tuomaa sekä oman arvontunnetta kohottavaa tukea. Ensimmäinen osatutkimus osoitti myös, että Al-Anonin kontekstitekijät, kuten ryhmien ideologia, vaikuttavat siihen, millaista supporttiivista viestintää palavereissa esiintyy. Toinen osatutkimus osoitti, että Al-Anonin jäsenet arvioivat hyödyllisiksi seuraavat Al-Anonin supporttiivisen viestinnän elementit: positiivinen yhteisö supporttiivisena verkostona, vertaiset

tuen lähteenä, Al-Anonin konteksti tuen viestimisen tilanteena sekä kokemusten jakaminen supporttiivisen viestinnän muotona. Kolmas osatutkimus paljasti, että jäsenten mukaan Al-Anonin vaikutusmekanismit perustuvat sellaiselle supporttiiviselle viestinnälle, jonka avulla heidän on mahdollista arvioida omaa tilannettaan uudelleen. Uudelleenarviointeja tuotetaan supporttiivisen viestinnän sisältötason lisäksi myös viestinnän suhdetasolla. Neljännen artikkelin tulokset osoittavat, että Al-Anonin jäsenet kokivat ryhmän supporttiivisen viestinnän auttavan heitä muuttamaan kontrolloivaa ja läheisriippuvaista viestintäänsä suhteessa alkoholi-riippuvaiseen kumppaniinsa hyväksyvämmäksi ja rajaavammaksi. Jäsenten oman viestinnän muuttuminen oli muuttanut myös heidän kokemustaan suhteen tilasta. Yhdessä väitöskirjan tulokset tarjoavat Al-Anonin supporttiivista viestintää kokonaisvaltaisesti kuvaavan mallin. Malli auttaa ymmärtämään supporttiivisen viestinnän eri elementtien erilaisia funktioita ja keskinäisiä suhteista.

Väitöskirjan pohdintaluvussa keskitytään ensinnäkin Al-Anonissa tapahtuvan supporttiivisen viestinnän kontekstuaaliseen ja vuorovaikutukselliseen luonteeseen. Tämä tuo lisävaloa siihen, miten supporttiivisen viestinnän ei-sisällölliset elementit vaikuttavat tuen hyödyllisyyteen. Tähän keskusteluun liittyvät tuen epäsuorat muodot, joiden voidaan nähdä syntyvän nimenomaan tukitilanteiden vuorovaikutus- ja kontekstielementtien kautta. Lisäksi supporttiivisen viestinnän suhdetason voidaan nähdä syntyvän erityisesti näiden epäsuorien tuen muotojen kautta. Toinen havainto koskee supporttiivisen viestinnän vaikutuksia muihin kuin tuen antajan ja vastaanottajan välisiin suhteisiin. Tämä puolestaan valottaa supporttiivisen viestinnän pitkäaikaisia suhteisiin liittyviä vaikutuksia. Lopuksi pohdinnassa paneudutaan siihen, millaisia hyötyjä supporttiivisen viestinnän teoreettinen näkökulma tarjoaa vertaistukiryhmien tutkimukselle.

*Avainsanat:* interpersonaalinen viestintä, supporttiivinen viestintä, vertaistukiryhmä, alkoholistien läheiset, Al-Anon

# LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

- I Kuuluvainen, V., & Isotalus, P. (2013). Communication of support in mutual-aid group meetings for alcoholics' friends and relatives. *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 30(5), 425-444. doi: 10.2478/nsad-2013-0036
- II Kuuluvainen, V., & Isotalus, P. (2014). Supporting others – Supporting oneself: Members' evaluations of supportive communication in Al-Anon mutual-aid groups. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 14(1), 45–53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scoms.2014.03.009>
- III Kuuluvainen, V., & Isotalus, P. (2015). Words and beyond: Members' experiences of the supportive communication and helping mechanisms of Al-Anon groups. *Journal of Groups in Addiction & Recovery*, 10(3), 204–223. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1556035X.2015.1066725>
- IV Kuuluvainen, V., & Isotalus, P. (2015). Communicating to change communication: Alcoholics' romantic partners' mutual-aid group attendance in relation to communication with their alcoholic partners. *Iowa Journal of Communication*, 47(1), 4–27. Available from [http://www.uni.edu/commstudies/ica/journal/journal\\_articles.htm](http://www.uni.edu/commstudies/ica/journal/journal_articles.htm)

# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

Articles I-IV:

I conducted the data gathering and analyses, drafted the papers and was the corresponding author for all the sub-studies. Dr. Pekka Isotalus planned the studies and data gathering with me and offered comments on the manuscripts at several phases of the research process. The articles were proofread by an academic editing service.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

“You can’t keep it unless you give it away”, a slogan of the Al-Anon mutual-aid groups for the friends and family members of alcoholics, exemplifies also the very core of this dissertation’s results. That is, the impetus of recovery in the Al-Anon groups is the notion of giving instead of taking and accepting instead of fighting. However, let us start from the beginning.

Alcohol problems constitute a notable public health issue all over the world, and thus, have remained an ongoing research interest. However, few studies address the harms that alcoholism causes the alcoholic’s friends and family. Even so, the harmful effects of excessive alcohol consumption are essentially interactional in nature (Warpenius, Holmila & Tigerstedt, 2013). Engaging in a close relationship with someone who drinks excessively generates stress that negatively affects physical and psychological health (Copello, 2010; Dawson, Grant, Chou & Stinson, 2007; Orford, Copello, Velleman & Templeton, 2010; Roberts & Brent 1982; Schäfer, 2011). In fact, it can be estimated that approximately 40 percent of the adult population in Finland suffers from someone else’s substance misuse (see Al-Anon, 2015c; Huhtanen & Tigerstedt, 2010; Tilastokeskus, 2015). Thus, the interpersonal effects of alcoholism are by all means part of the broader public health problem of alcoholism, although they can rarely be described in monetary values (Mäkelä, 2012).

This dissertation aims to contribute to the existing research on alcoholism by examining the experiences of the friends and family members of alcoholics in their attempts to deal with such experiences with similar others in Al-Anon mutual-aid groups. More specifically, the main purpose of this study is to comprehensively understand the elements and functions of supportive communication in the context of Al-Anon groups.

To meet this objective, this dissertation applies an interpersonal communication’s perspective to these issues. In Finland, the interpersonal communication perspective can be seen as the core of speech communication research, in which this study is located. The interpersonal communication perspective places communication behaviours in personal relationships and the social cognitive and meaning-making processes attached to those behaviours at the centre of the investigation (Knapp & Daly, 2011).

Indeed, the phenomena investigated in this dissertation are particularly

interesting from the interpersonal communication's perspective. That is, first, the ways alcoholism affects the friends and family of the alcoholic are essentially interactional in nature and saliently manifest themselves in the significant others' communication with the alcoholic. Second, the recovery pursued in Al-Anon is generated through the supportive interactions among the members. Thus, both the baseline problem and methods of solving it are both communicative in their essence. Next, the relationship with an alcoholic, Al-Anon, and supportive communication's theoretical foundation, that constitute the three basic elements of this dissertation are briefly described as follows.

The first of the three elements is the interpersonal relationship with the alcoholic. In this dissertation, "alcoholism" is used to refer to the types of drinking and behaviour perceived as problematic and thus, labelled as alcoholism by the friends and family of the drinker. Indeed, the negative effects that alcoholism has on loved ones can be seen as inherent in interpersonal communication with the alcoholic (Schäfer, 2011; Stenton, Best, & Roberts, 2014; Wiseman, 1991; 1976b). In addition, the significant other's way of communicating with the alcoholic has been noted to feature certain patterns that have been the subject of popular literature as well as research. "Co-dependency" is a disputed term often used to describe the problems of alcoholics' friends and family. The term became especially popular after Melody Beattie's book *Codependent no more: How to stop controlling others and start caring for yourself* (1987; Finnish translation, 1994: *Irti läheisriippuvuudesta: Miten lopetan muiden holhoamisen ja alan huolehtia itsestäni*) and in Finland after Tommy Hellsten's book *Virtahepo olohuoneessa: Läheisriippuvuus ja sisäisen lapsen kohtaaminen* (1992; Free English translation: *Hippo in the living room: Codependency and the encountering of an inner child*). In fact, co-dependency at one point was even included in the psychiatric diagnostic manual DSM (Le Poire, Hallet & Giles, 1998).

Today, co-dependency continues to be a controversial term among clinicians and researchers as they struggle to find a clear definition. The psychological definition of co-dependency has also been considered incorrectly incriminating, especially to the female spouses of alcoholics, by describing the normal reactions of people living in a highly stressful situation in pathological terms (see Le Poire et al., 1998; Peled & Sacks, 2008). In this dissertation, co-dependency is approached from the interpersonal communication's point of view. The communication of the alcoholics' family members has been especially studied by Beth Le Poire (e.g., Le Poire, 1994; 2004). Another notable contribution to the subject of alcoholics' loved ones includes Jaqueline Wiseman's social psychological perspective on the wives of alcoholics (e.g., Wiseman, 1991), Jim Orford's work on addictions in the family context (e.g., Orford, Velleman, Copello, Templeton & Ibanga, 2010) and in Finland, Marja Holmila's research on drinking in the family context (e.g., Holmila, 2003).

However, previous studies focusing on the effects that alcoholism has on others rarely address the possibilities that the loved ones can have in terms of recovery. In essence, this dissertation aims to contribute to the previous research on alcohol's harm to others by addressing one way of coping with the alcoholism of a loved one: attending a mutual-aid group.

This brings us to the second fundamental topic of this dissertation: Al-Anon, which is a network of mutual-aid groups aiming to help the friends and family members of alcoholics to cope with their relationships with alcoholics and live satisfying lives despite the alcoholic's choices.

Al-Anon was established in the United States in 1950s and currently, is a worldwide organisation including 25,400 groups in over 130 countries (Al-Anon, 2015b). In Finland, there are ca. 140 Al-Anon groups (Al-Anon, 2015a). Al-Anon is a member-led organisation oriented around the World Service Conference held annually in the United States (Zajdow, 2002). In Finland, the groups are arranged under the Finnish central service (Al-Anon keskuspalvelu ry) that handles the practical issues of the organisation and publishes the Finnish Al-Anon magazine, *Tietoavain*. However, Al-Anon does not have official leaders and the individual Al-Anon groups are independent in their decisions. In addition, Al-Anon offers the possibility of service work such as making coffee at the meetings.

Al-Anon has not been extensively studied (for a chronology of literature relevant to Al-Anon, see White & Budnick, 2016) and the existing studies have been conducted mainly in the field of social sciences. Undoubtedly, the most prominent contributions thus far made on the subject include Grazyna Zajdow's book *Al-Anon narratives: Women, self-stories, and mutual aid* (2002). In addition, Joan Ablon with her early work (e.g., Ablon, 1974; 1982a; 1982b) and more recently, Christine Timko with her colleagues (e.g., Timko, Laudet & Moos, 2015) have conducted research on Al-Anon. This dissertation extends the existing research on mutual-aid groups by approaching Al-Anon from the perspective of interpersonal communication. Thus, it gives new insight into the actual forms of communication underlying the "active ingredients" (Timko, Young & Moos, 2012, p. 285) of mutual-aid groups often studied in the social sciences.

Moreover, the research on mutual-aid groups has been accused of lacking clear theoretical foundations (Cline, 1999; So, 2009). This dissertation strives to fill this gap by taking a supportive communication's theoretical perspective on Al-Anon, the third defining concept of this dissertation. The perspective of supportive communication was chosen as the basis for this dissertation since the groups are fundamentally dedicated to supportive processes (Cline, 1999). Indeed, from the theoretical perspective of supportive communication, social support is essentially conveyed through communication and thus, should be studied as such (Burlinson, Albrecht, Goldsmith & Sarason, 1994; Burlinson & MacGeorge, 2002). The vast

body of research in the field of supportive communication provides an analytical framework which can be applied to understand the communicative processes in Al-Anon. The supportive communication perspective has been specifically expanded by the late Brant Burleson (e.g., Burleson, 1994). In addition, Deana Goldsmith, Erina MacGeorge, Graham Bodie and Susanne Jones are names that recur in the references of this dissertation (e.g., Goldsmith, 2004; MacGeorge, 2009; Jones & Bodie, 2014). In Finland, two dissertations have been conducted in the field of supportive communication (supportive communication translates into Finnish as “supportiivinen viestintä” or “tukea antava viestintä”): Leena Mikkola’s (2006) study on supportive communication in context of hospitals and Ira Virtanen’s (2015) research on communicating support in men’s friendships.

In addition, Kevin Wright has notably contributed to our understanding of social support processes, especially in online support groups (e.g., Wright & Rains, 2014). However, the general trend in studies on support groups in the field of communication has been to focus on professionally-led groups (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). This dissertation broadens the communication research on support groups by shedding light on the effects that the unique context of 12-step member-led mutual-aid groups can have on the supportive communication processes.

The summary thesis begins with describing the context and theoretical foundation of this dissertation. The following chapters present the research objective and methodology adopted in the sub-studies. In the next chapter, the results of the sub-studies are briefly described. The reader is encouraged to see the original publications for a more detailed presentation of the results. Finally, the main conclusions of the dissertation are discussed and the research is evaluated as a whole.

## 2 CONTEXT OF AL-ANON

This chapter describes Al-Anon as the context for the supportive processes studied in the dissertation. The surrounding context is an important element affecting social support processes (Burlison, 2009). I first describe the general situation and experiences of the alcoholic's friends and family and the interpersonal challenges that such a situation poses. Thereafter, I describe the basic framework, elements of the meetings and benefits of Al-Anon suggested by previous research.

### 2.1 Interpersonal relationship with an alcoholic

The effects that alcoholism has on the alcoholic's friends and family are especially visible in the realm of interpersonal communication. Relationships between the alcoholic and his or her friends and family, especially romantic partners, have often been characterised using the term "co-dependency" (see Cullen & Carr, 1999; Duggan & Le Poire-Molineux, 2013; Haaken, 1993; Harkness, Cotrell & Cotrell, 1997; Hogg & Frank, 1992; Le Poire et al., 1998; Peled & Sacks, 2008). However, labelling the friends and family of alcoholics as co-dependents has also noted to mistakenly describe the process of coping with a difficult situation in pathological terms (Orford, Copello, Velleman et al., 2010; Orford, Velleman, Natera, Templeton & Copello, 2013). This dissertation adopts Orford, Copello, Velleman et al.'s (2010) definition of co-dependency as behaviours representing an ordinary person's attempt to cope in a highly stressful situation.

Moreover, in this dissertation, co-dependency is not seen as an inherent trait in the personality of the friends and family of alcoholics. Indeed, as Holmila (1997) has suggested, the ways the ones living their lives with problem drinkers cope in the given situation are not to be understood as determined by individual psychology, but rather, as being determined through cultural and societal expectations. In this dissertation, following Le Poire et al. (1998), co-dependency is seen as patterns of communication. Le Poire and her colleagues (e.g., Duggan & Le Poire-Molineux, 2013; Duggan, Dailey & Le Poire 2008; Le Poire, 2004; 1994; see also Wright, 2011) have significantly contributed to our understanding of the communication patterns of people living with addicts. According to their studies (Duggan et al., 2008; Duggan, Le Poire & Addis, 2006; Le Poire, 1994; Le Poire & Cope, 1999),

the communication of the addict's partner often both reinforces and punishes the alcoholic for drinking in an inconsistent manner. Thus, partners' use altercentrism as their power base in the relationship with the alcoholic (Le Poire et al., 1998). Although the partner strives to diminish the alcoholic's substance misuse, the effects of this type of inconsistent communication often lead to the opposite results. In addition, Wiseman (1976b) states that after the partner's unsuccessful attempts to make the alcoholic sober, the relationship often becomes one that is completely silent. Building on these notions, this dissertation approaches the problems of the friends and family of alcoholics as patterns of interpersonal communication. Thus, the focus is on the interactions between the significant others and the alcoholics, instead of the personal features of the interlocutors.

Broadly speaking, this dissertation focuses on the coping attempts of an alcoholic's friends and family in the difficult situation described above. From a macro-level perspective, Orford, Copello, Velleman et al. (2010) have developed a model labelled as the stress-strain-coping-support model (SSCS) aimed at describing the coping process of the addicts' family members. The model begins with the assumption that a family member's addiction is a highly stressful situation for other members of the family, and thus, can be a strain on the health of those affected. As a result, the family members must decide how best to respond to the behaviour of the alcoholic family member. The model assumes that the family members can enhance their own wellbeing and have a constructive effect on limiting the addict's substance use.

The final important component of the model involves social support. Unfortunately, the alcoholism of a significant other is often stigmatising, thus rendering the threshold of seeking help quite high (Wiseman, 1976a; 1991). Furthermore, the friends and family of alcoholics often feel that the support they receive is inappropriate, as individuals without similar experiences fail to understand the thoroughly complex nature of the relationship (for a further discussion of why the support for the alcoholic's significant others often fails, see Orford, Velleman, Copello et al., 2010). Thus, some of the friends and family members of alcoholics turn to Al-Anon for support (Zajdow, 2002). Therefore, in this dissertation, attending Al-Anon is considered a way of coping with the stressful situation of having an alcoholic loved one.

## 2.2 Al-Anon as a member-led 12-step mutual-aid group

It is important to grasp where Al-Anon stands in the field of social support groups, since support groups tend to differ and have also been subject to several classifications in the literature (Levy, 1979; Nylund, 1996). First, Al-Anon groups

are completely member-led, non-affiliated and self-sustained (Schiff & Bargal, 2000), as opposed to professionally-led support groups. The member-led groups also often gather regularly as opposed to professionally-led ones that are usually designated for a certain period of time, such as those in hospitals designed to enhance recovery from somatic diseases (e.g., cancer). The member-led groups also include an especially strong norm of reciprocity (Riessman, 1965; Zajdow, 2002). For instance, Al-Anon offers members a possibility to do service work, such as making coffee in the meetings or working as an area representative, and has a sponsorship system so that the more experienced members can sponsor new members in the groups (for more about these particular aspects of the Al-Anon program, see Ablon, 1982a; 1982b). In the sub-studies of this dissertation, I use the terms “mutual-aid group” and “mutual-support group” to refer to Al-Anon (as per the reviewers’ suggestions). In this summary thesis, I use the term “mutual-aid group” to refer to member-led groups such as Al-Anon and “support group” for support groups in general.

In addition to being member-led, strong ideological foundations make Al-Anon a truly unique context for the study of supportive communication processes. In the realm of member-led mutual-aid groups, another distinction can be made on the basis of the groups’ specific ideology (Schiff & Bargal, 2000). Al-Anon is a 12-step group, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which means that the groups follow a 12-step program (see Al-Anon, 2009; 2016) that shape their ideology (Al-Anon, 1985; Cline, 1999; Anze, 1979). The 12-step program of Al-Anon originates from the shared history of AA and Al-Anon. Indeed, Al-Anon was founded when the wives of the alcoholic men attending AA noticed that they reacted in maladaptive ways to their husbands’ alcoholism, and thus, needed their own support network (Al-Anon, 1979; Haaken, 1993). Thus, Al-Anon was built on AA groups’ ideological and practical foundations (see Mäkelä et al., 1996) as many other 12-step groups that followed. Today, there exists several different 12-step groups for various problems (e.g., Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous).

The 12-step ideology in Al-Anon depends on the concept of a power greater than oneself (“Higher Power”) and the member’s powerlessness over the loved one’s alcoholism, in contrast to stressing the individual’s ability to shape his or her own surroundings. However, Al-Anon leaves the definition of higher power up to the discretion of its members and hence, resists being specifically defined as a religious community (Al-Anon, 2015d). However, the Al-Anon ideology can also be seen as displaying certain contradictions (see Anze, 1979). For example, in addition to the importance of powerlessness, the ideology also stresses self-responsibility. That is, although members are encouraged to concentrate on themselves as the only entity over which they have some kind of power, their own “out of control”

behaviour is also seen as a symptom of the family disease of alcoholism. Thus, although remission is a central theme in Al-Anon and members are not blamed for their behaviours, the practical focus of Al-Anon can be seen as modifying the members' behaviour towards the alcoholic to "lovingly detach" from him or her. Accordingly, Timko et al. (2014) showed that a more satisfying relationship with the alcoholic is one of primary reasons for members' initial attendance at Al-Anon.

## 2.3 Al-Anon meetings

The 12-step ideology is clearly visible in the communication of the Al-Anon meetings including slogans, rituals and the use of Al-Anon literature (Schiff & Bargal, 2000). The structured meeting format in 12-step groups creates a particularly interesting frame for supportive communication. Communication in Al-Anon meetings is highly ritualistic in contrast to free conversation; the meetings start with the chairperson reading from the Al-Anon literature (e.g., a step) and end with the serenity prayer said together aloud, often with members holding hands (see Ablon, 1974; Cutter & Cutter, 1987; Roth & Tan, 2007). Throughout the course of the meeting, the members take turns sharing their personal experiences, often with the help of a timer, and directly commenting on others' stories is not allowed.

Communication scholars have paid much more attention to professionally run support groups than 12-step mutual aid groups such as Al-Anon. In addition, those few studies in the field of communication that have addressed 12-step member-led groups appear to have mainly concentrated on AA. These studies include Kevin Wright's (1997) grounded theory approach to AA, concluding that through the communication in AA, the members are able to reinterpret their life events. Also VanLear (2006) has studied supportive processes in AA groups as part of the interpersonal aspects of recovering from alcoholism. In another study VanLear, Sheehan, Withers and Walker (2005) described the supportive communication patterns in an online AA meeting. One of the more recent studies on AA groups in the field of communication includes Thatcher's (2011) analysis on AA from the perspective of dialogism and relational dialectics theory, which show how members negotiate tensions between religious discourses in the groups. However, it appears that face-to-face meeting 12-step mutual aid groups have not been extensively studied specifically from the theoretical perspective of supportive communication. Moreover, it appears that Al-Anon, specifically, has not been previously studied in the field of interpersonal communication.

The most robust body of research on face-to-face meeting 12-step mutual aid



groups' interactions can be found in the social sciences. An extensive account of the AA meetings is provided by Mäkelä et al. (1996), who state that it is especially the oral tradition that makes AA a truly unique organisation. The distinctive features of the AA's oral tradition include the use of slogans, structured rules of communication, turn taking instead of free conversation and the production of self-narratives. Similarly, Arminen (2004) has studied AA groups from the perspective of conversation analysis and calls the interactional manner in the groups as involving support by "second stories" (see also Arminen, 1998; 2001). From a broader perspective, Denzin (1987) states that the stories shared in AA groups are expected to be constructed on the basis of the groups' ideological tenets.

Although these features of AA groups can be assumed to reflect Al-Anon groups as well, there exist only a few studies specifically addressing the communication in Al-Anon. For instance, Saulnier (1994, p. 254) states that the stories shared in the Al-Anon meetings are constructed using three elements: "the way life was experienced prior to coming to Al-Anon", "the occurrences in Al-Anon that seemed to affect life and the member's perception of it" and "the resulting perceptual and behavioral changes". In another study, Ablon (1974) conceptualises the interactions in Al-Anon as "education by alternatives".

The supportive communication perspective as part of the interpersonal communication framework adopted in this dissertation contributes to these observations by viewing the group communication from a broader perspective, as parts of complex interactional processes affected by several contextual features, and more importantly, through the meanings given to those interactions by the members. In addition, in this dissertation, the focus on communication is extended from the structured meetings so that it includes all interactions in the Al-Anon framework between the members. For example, the sponsorship system of Al-Anon includes communication between members also outside the meetings.

## 2.4 Benefits of mutual-aid groups

The helping mechanisms or active ingredients of mutual-aid groups have been extensively studied in the fields of psychology and social sciences (see Nylund, 2005). These terms refer to the elements of mutual-aid groups that are thought to be responsible for producing positive effects on the members. These studies have resulted in several different lists and conceptualisations of elements responsible for positive outcomes in mutual-aid groups. For example, Schiff and Bargal (2000) and Lieberman (1976) listed processes such as "installing hope", "universality and an alternative to loneliness", "support", "teaching and learning coping methods", "communicating experimental knowledge", "self-disclosure",

“receiving feedback” and “expressing and experiencing intense emotions” as some of the helping mechanisms of mutual-aid groups (see also Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Humphreys, 1996; Kurtz, 1994; Levy, 1979). Specifically concerning Al-Anon, Timko et al. (2012, p. 285) proposed that the active ingredients of Al-Anon are those proposed by Moos (2008):

(a) bonding (the group is cohesive and supportive), goal direction (the group encourages personal growth, such as responsibility, self-discovery, and spirituality), and structure (the group embodies clear expectations); (b) the provision of norms and role models; (c) involvement in rewarding activities; and (d) bolstering self-efficacy and coping skills.

Moreover, mechanisms such as the reduction of uncertainty, enhanced sense of control over the environment, behavioural imitation, enhancement of self-esteem, interpersonal learning and the application of ideas such as social exchange theory and social comparison theory have been used to explain the working mechanisms of mutual-aid groups (see Arntson & Droge, 1987; Cline, 1999; Kurtz, 2004). Notably, also support provision has been noted as a fundamental element in mutual-aid groups in terms of its contribution to the members' well-being (Kurtz, 2004). According to this “helper-therapy principle” (Riessman, 1965), the provision of support enhances the provider's self-esteem and feelings of capability.

The helping mechanisms of mutual-aid groups listed above can also be seen as descriptors of the communication processes (e.g., sharing experiences) and the immediate or short-term cognitive effects (e.g., increased hopefulness) of the group meetings. Indeed, from an interpersonal communication perspective, the problem with the previous conceptualisations of helping mechanisms is that often they tend not to make a distinction between the actual communicative behaviour and its effects. As a response to such concerns, in this dissertation, the immediate effects incurred in the Al-Anon meetings are considered as the short-term effects of supportive communication.

Similarly, the positive effects that Al-Anon attendance can generate outside of the meetings are viewed in this dissertation as the long-term effects of supportive communication. Similar distinction in terms of the effects of AA groups' communication have been made previously by VanLear (2006). According to his study, communication with others in the groups had more to do with immediate “here and now” effects on the members' lives and the more long-term effects such as improved relationships with significant others were produced by working through the program steps.

The few studies that have specifically investigated the long-term outcomes of Al-Anon have shown that Al-Anon, for example, reduced the members' depressive symptoms (Rychtarik & McGillicuddy, 2005) and increased their coping skills

(Gorman & Rooney, 1979; see also O'Farrel & Clements, 2012; for review see Timko et al., 2012). Indeed, mutual-aid groups have been generally associated with enhanced mental and physical health and interpersonal learning (Cline, 1999; Seebohm et al., 2013). In this dissertation, the long-term effects of Al-Anon are viewed from the perspective of interpersonal communication. In other words, the effects that Al-Anon attendance has on the significant others' communication with the alcoholic are of central importance. By focusing on these specific effects, this dissertation sheds light on the possible effects that supportive communication may have on enhancing communication outside the support situation.

### 3 SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION'S PERSPECTIVE ON AL-ANON

Previous research on mutual-aid groups appears to lack studies conducted on strong theoretical premises. Similar observations have also been made by other support group researchers (e.g., Cline, 1999; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000; Schiff & Bargal 2000; So, 2009). In this dissertation, the theoretical perspective of supportive communication was chosen as an analytic tool to investigate the supportive processes in Al-Anon. The supportive communication perspective is distinct from many of the sociological or psychological perspectives on social support in that it considers social support as essentially communicative in character (Burleson et al., 1994; for an extended discussion of the distinctive features of the supportive communication perspective, see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Supportive communication has been defined as “verbal and nonverbal communication produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid” (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 374; for reviews of supportive communication research, see MacGeorge, Feng & Burleson, 2011; MacGeorge, 2009). It appears that the supportive communication’s perspective has been mainly used to study online support groups (Dennis, Kunkel & Keyton, 2008). In this chapter, I explain the four theoretical aspects: types, quality, mechanisms and outcomes, of supportive communication relevant to the sub-studies of this dissertation.

#### 3.1 Content types of supportive messages

In previous research, the contents of supportive messages have been classified in several ways (for a review, see Cutrona & Russel, 1990). Some of the most common classifications, as well as the most relevant to this dissertation, are as follows: (1) emotional support such as comforting (e.g., Burleson, 2003); (2) informational support such as giving advice (e.g., Wills, 1985); (3) esteem support such as complimenting (e.g., Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011); and (4) social network support such as expressions of companionship (e.g., Cutrona & Suhr,

1992). Supportive messages have also been divided into two groups depending on whether they are intended to facilitate action or nurturance (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994). Communication scholars have mostly studied emotion-focused support (e.g., Burleson, 2003; Jones & Bodie, 2014). However, informational support in the form of advice giving (e.g., Feng, 2009; MacGeorge, Feng & Thompson, 2008; MacGeorge, Feng, Butler & Budarz, 2004) and, more recently, esteem support messages (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011) have also gained attention in the field of interpersonal communication.

Although support groups have been noted to include emotional support (Braithwaite, Waldron & Finn, 1999; Zajdow, 2002), informational support is often reported as the most prominent and/or important form of support in the groups (e.g., Alexander, Peterson & Holligshead, 2003; Constantinos & Liu, 2009; see also Ablon, 1974). However, like most support group research in the field of supportive communication, these studies have been conducted on online support groups (see Dennis et al., 2008). Indeed, although the face-to-face context clearly differs from online groups (e.g., nonverbal communication), the theoretical types of supportive communication appear to have been rarely applied to face-to-face groups. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by describing the contents of communication in the face-to-face meetings of Al-Anon groups through the theoretical types of supportive communication.

The benefit of detecting the contents of supportive communication in the meetings is that it sheds light on the actual communicative acts used to support others. Viewing the communication in Al-Anon through the well-established theoretical types of support also enables interpreting Al-Anon's supportive processes through previous research on the different types of support. However, it is important to remember that supportive messages may simultaneously communicate various support types. That is, in addition to the content, supportive messages become further defined through the relational and contextual features of the support situation (see Burleson, 2009). Accordingly, there exist several qualitative features affecting the helpfulness of support, as will be discussed next.

### 3.2 Quality of supportive communication

According to Orford, Velleman, Copello et al. (2010), it is the quality of received support, not the quantity, that matters the most to the significant others of alcoholics. Thus, emphasising quality means focusing on the elements of supportive communication that make it more or less helpful to the receiver. Social science research on mutual-aid groups has failed to pay sufficient attention to the qualitative features of the groups' supportive processes. Indeed, according

to Burleson (1994; see also Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), it is a distinctive feature of communication research to study the qualitative features of social support messages. According to Burleson (2009), the list of factors affecting the supportiveness of messages is constantly growing. Following this line of research, the qualitative features of Al-Anon's supportive processes are placed at the core of this dissertation's focus. Here, the quality of supportive communication is approached through the members' evaluations of the elements of helpful support in Al-Anon. Next, I present a few of the most relevant factors affecting the helpfulness of supportive communication in relation to the mutual-aid group context of Al-Anon.

First, the relationship between the interlocutors in the support situation is believed to have an effect on how helpful the support is considered to be. More specifically, the appropriateness of the support provider in relation to the support receiver's problem is known to affect the perceived quality of support (Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein & Herbert, 1992). In everyday situations, support is often preferred from those close to the support receiver such as family members (Frazier, Tix & Barnett, 2003; Pierce, Sarason & Sarason, 1992; Uno, Uchino & Smith, 2002). In the case of giving advice, professionals may also be respected as valuable sources of support (MacGeorge et al., 2008). In contrast to these understandings, the source of support in Al-Anon is the anonymous peers suffering from similar problems. According to Helgeson and Gottlieb's (2000) review, the similarity between the experiences of the support group members has in fact been considered as one of the support groups' greatest benefits.

Second, in addition to the support source, the compatibility between the type of supportive message and origin of the stress that the receiver is experiencing has been claimed to affect the support's helpfulness (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992). In Al-Anon, the specific problems of the members and unique context of Al-Anon undoubtedly influence the members' evaluations of the support's helpfulness. It has been claimed that emotional support is the most beneficial type in all situations (Burleson, 2003). It has also been claimed that emotion-focused support is especially appreciated in situations where the support receiver does not feel in control of the current situation whereas problem-focused support has been suggested as especially helpful in situations where the support receiver feels that she or he has power over the situation (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Cutrona & Russel, 1990; Green-Hamann & Sherblom, 2014; Toller, 2011). However, problem-focused support is also often reported as unhelpful by support recipients (e.g., MacGeorge et al., 2008). According to the Al-Anon ideology, the members are not in control of their loved one's alcoholism and instead are limited to deciding how they themselves should act in the current situation. In addition, directly advising others is not allowed in Al-Anon meetings.

Third, the contextual elements of the support situation also have an effect on how the support is experienced (Bodie & Burleson, 2008). For example, the emotional atmosphere of mutual-aid groups has been claimed to be especially beneficial for the members (Cline, 1999; Wollert, Levy & Knight, 1982). In this dissertation, Al-Anon, including the members' shared reason for attendance and the distinctive elements of the 12-step mutual-aid group meetings, is considered as the context for supportive communication. The contextual elements of Al-Anon are detailed in chapter 2. The effects that the 12-step context have on the supportive processes in the groups appear to have received little attention by support group research.

Finally, all of these elements can be seen as dimensions of person-centeredness of supportive communication, which refers to the sophistication or overall quality of supportive messages. Indeed, the person-centred theory has undoubtedly been the predominant perspective in the realm of supportive communication research over the past few decades. According to the theory, highly person-centred messages "explicitly legitimize and validate the emotions of the upset person in talk" (Jones & Bodie, 2014, pp. 374; see also Burleson, 2008; 1994; High & Dillard, 2012; Rack, Burleson, Bodie, Holmstrom & Servaty-Seib, 2008). However, as demonstrated, Al-Anon features several unusual characteristics that make it different from everyday support situations and thus, provide a new perspective on the elements affecting the helpfulness of social support.

As is the case with supportive communication research in general, the abovementioned elements primarily describe beneficial supportive communication from the perspective of the support receiver. In contrast, research in other disciplines shows that supportive communication also positively affects the support provider (e.g., Brown, Nesse, Vinokur & Smith, 2003; Väänänen, Buuk, Kivimäki, Pentti & Vahtera, 2005). In this dissertation, the provider's viewpoint is also considered and thus included in the overall supportive communication perspective.

### 3.3 Helping mechanisms of supportive communication

The types of supportive communication and their quality have more to do with the supportive messages per se, and the context in which the supportive communication takes place. The two forthcoming chapters focusing on the mechanisms and outcomes of supportive communication describe the short- and long-term effects of supportive communication, a distinction originally made by Burleson (1994; see also High & Solomon, 2014; Joseph, Afifi & Denes, 2015; MacGeorge, 2009). From this perspective, the benefits of mutual-aid groups

described in chapter 2.4 such as increased hopefulness can be seen as the short-term effects of support groups' supportive communication. However, from the viewpoint of supportive communication, the question remains: how was increased hopefulness created in communication in the first place? There appears to be little effort invested into answering this question. One of the few (if not the only) answers, and the one applied in this dissertation, is Burleson and Goldsmith's (1998) theory of conversationally induced reappraisals. The theory is utilised in this dissertation as it helps understand the mutual relationships of supportive communication and its short-term effects, and thus, helps explain the helping mechanisms of Al-Anon.

The theory of conversationally induced reappraisals (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; see also Jones & Wirtz, 2006) builds on appraisal theories (see Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Metts & Planalp, 2011) that claim that emotions are not a result of the upsetting situation per se but instead arise from the situational appraisals that people make. Hence, if the origin of the stress experienced by the support receiver can be removed or changed, then the receiver may benefit from support that promotes problem-focused coping, such as advice that helps the receiver eliminate the problem all together. However, if the stress-causing situation is not in the hands of the support receiver, then the support provider can help the receiver reappraise the situation more positively, perhaps by helping the receiver view the upsetting event from a broader and more universal perspective. Importantly, the theory views supportive communication that produces the reappraisals as supportive conversations. That is, according to Burleson and Goldsmith (1998), the reappraisal process is inherently interactional in nature and cannot be reduced to isolated support messages. From this perspective, the mechanism producing such elements as increased hopefulness in mutual-aid group interaction can be understood as the generation of reappraisals.

To summarise, to analytically study the helping mechanisms of Al-Anon's supportive communication, this dissertation describes these mechanisms in terms of a two-fold process including the generation of reappraisals in supportive interactions and the immediate short-term effects generated through the process of reappraisal.

### 3.4 Outcomes of supportive communication

In contrast to reappraisals as the short-term effects of supportive communication, this sub-chapter concentrates on the outcomes outside of the support situation as the long-term effects of Al-Anon's supportive communication.

In general, supportive communication has been associated with enhanced



well-being, development of coping skills and greater relationship satisfaction, among various outcomes (see Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011; MacGeorge, Samter & Gillihan, 2005; MacGeorge et al., 2011). The relational outcomes of support have been of special interest to communication scholars (MacGeorge et al., 2011). However, in previous studies, the relational effects of supportive communication have been limited to include only the effects that support has on the relationship between the support provider and receiver. In this dissertation, the long-term relational outcomes of the supportive communication in Al-Anon are seen as they appear in a relationship outside of the support-giving situation, or in the case of this study, the alcoholic-partner relationship. Indeed, the fourth sub-study that specifically examines the relational outcomes of Al-Anon's support focuses on the experiences of the alcoholics' romantic partners, who form 96% (Al-Anon, 2015a) of Al-Anon's membership. The benefit of specifying the target of interest in terms of the effects of supportive communication is that it draws attention to the association between the specific elements of supportive communication and corresponding effects. In other words, this dissertation also focuses on the features of supportive communication in Al-Anon that the members consider as being responsible for the specific changes in their relationships with the alcoholics.

The focus in the fourth sub-study is also on ways in which the partners changed their communication in their relationships with the alcoholics, and thus, on the effects that these changes in the partners' communication had on the relationships more generally. According to Le Poire, Hallet and Erlandson (2000; see also Duggan & Le Poire-Molineux, 2013), the partners of alcoholics can enhance their own well-being as well as reduce the alcoholic's drinking by communicating more consistently. Professional treatment programs for alcoholism that involve family members often also strive to change the communication among the family members to break apart the maladaptive family dynamics (e.g., O'Farrel & Fals-Stewart, 2008; Schmid & Brown, 2008). Similarly, according to Timko et al. (2014), the aspiration to enhance the relationship with the alcoholic is often stated as a reason for joining Al-Anon. In accordance, Al-Anon attendance has been reported to result in improvements in members' relationships with the alcoholics (Timko et al., 2012; Timko et al., 2013). One of the few studies focusing on the effects of Al-Anon includes for example Gorman and Rooney's (1979, p. 1037) study that found that the Al-Anon attendance of the wives of alcoholics was associated with less counterproductive behaviours such as "nagging, preaching and coaxing".

From a broader perspective, it has been presented that the friends and family members of alcoholics eventually have to redefine their relationship with the alcoholic (Holmila, 2003; Wiseman, 1991). According to Holmila (2003), this process of redefinition is often long-lasting, occurs within the contradictory

expectations of society and is not essentially limited to whether a romantic relationship with the alcoholic is maintained. Rather, it includes dealing with the significant other's identity and existential issues. From a more practical perspective, Orford, Velleman, Copello et al. (2010, p. 51–55) have outlined three ways of coping with the alcoholism of a significant other: (1) putting up with it; (2) withdrawing and gaining independence; or (3) standing up to the substance misuse. Similarly, Wiseman (1975; 1991) states that the partners of alcoholics either keep sinking deeper into despair or manage to change their perspectives and gain independence.

It is noteworthy that since this dissertation focuses on mutual aid, the emphasis is on those significant others of alcoholics who are, at least by attending a mutual-aid group, coping with their situations in some way. Moreover, the long-term relational consequences of Al-Anon are scrutinised through the experiences of Al-Anon members who voluntarily attend the groups and thus, are likely to talk positively about the groups' effects. Although an important subject of study, the experiences of those who have dropped out of Al-Anon (see Timko et al., 2015) are outside of the scope of this dissertation.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research philosophy and methodological choices

The overarching philosophical assumptions of this dissertation echo the interpretivist and naturalistic approaches in qualitative interpersonal communication research. Although the terms “interpretivism” and “naturalism” can be considered synonymous (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), the methodological literature varies in the use of terms. Thus, in this chapter, I use a composite “interpretivist/naturalistic” term. From the interpretivist/naturalistic viewpoint, the realities are seen as unique and plural, and the purpose of the research is to deeply understand meaning-making processes that individuals engage in (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In addition, the data analysed in the sub-studies have been gathered in naturalistic, “real” settings (see Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), interpretivist/naturalistic studies understand the world holistically, being the result of interactional construction and in a constant process of change. Thus the purpose of interpretivist/naturalistic inquiry is to produce context-specific knowledge that account for its value-laden nature. In interpretivist/naturalistic studies, the phenomena under investigation are generally either directly observed or the experiences of the individuals engaged in the phenomena are inquired (Frey et al., 2000); methodological tools also used in this dissertation. In supportive communication research, the interpretivist/naturalistic approach has been one among others (see Bureson & MacGeorge, 2002; Spacapan & Oskamp, 1992).

MacGeorge (2009) states that the naturalistic paradigm can be especially beneficial when studying supportive communication in specialised populations when there is reason to believe that the populations in question might experience support differently from the general population. Alcoholics’ significant others can be seen as such a specialised population. According to Kennedy, Humphrey and Borkman (1994, pp. 178), the interpretivist/naturalistic approach is also well-suited to the study of mutual-aid groups: “The naturalistic paradigm reflects this complex and multifaceted representation of reality and thus is congruent with the characteristics of the phenomenon of self-help groups”. Moreover, Kennedy et al. (1994) state that interpretivist/naturalistic studies provide an opportunity for the

researcher to view the group as the members see it and provide results that can be utilised by the study participants themselves.

The interpretivist/naturalistic paradigm is also a hypernym for several theoretical approaches in communication research (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Manning & Kunkel, 2014). I view all of the sub-studies of this dissertation as representing the phenomenological/dialogical approach of interpretivist interpersonal communication research, as outlined by Manning and Kunkel (2014, p. 3). That is, the primary purpose of each sub-study is guided by a phenomenological aim to understand the world and its interactions from the perspective of social actors, in this case, the Al-Anon members (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

However, the first sub-study utilising observations can be seen more clearly as adopting the dialogic approach. That is, the sub-study focuses on interactions between the group members itself and how meaning is co-created in the interaction (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The sub-studies II, III and IV, relying on the questionnaire and interview data, fall more clearly into the phenomenological paradigm of interpersonal communication research. In these studies, the main objective is to understand how the Al-Anon members perceive Al-Anon's communication and its effects and the types of meanings assigned to them (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Thus, as in the first sub-study, the Al-Anon communication, or my observations as a researcher, was the phenomenon under investigation; in the latter studies, the focus is on members' experiences with Al-Anon communication.

## 4.2 Research questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to comprehensively examine the elements and functions of supportive communication in the context of Al-Anon groups. This overall objective has been approached through four research areas, each of which has been separately addressed in the four sub-studies. A rationale and the articulated research questions addressing these four general research aims are outlined in what follows.

As presented in the preceding chapters, actual communication behaviour in mutual-aid groups has been insufficiently examined in former studies. Thus, the first aim of this dissertation is to detect (through observation) communication behaviours in Al-Anon groups as the theory-based content types of supportive communication. Previous literature also shows that contextual elements affect supportive processes. Thus, the effects that Al-Anon as a thoroughly unique context has on supportive communication in the groups is also taken into account. The first research question is as follows:

1. What types of support can be found in Al-Anon meetings, and how do the contextual features of Al-Anon affect the supportive communication in the meetings?

The context of Al-Anon features elements that differ from the default characteristics of other common support situations. As the first research aim strived to offer a third-party perspective on the supportive processes in Al-Anon, the second aim is to examine the members' views of the most helpful elements of supportive communication in Al-Anon and the reasons for considering specific elements as helpful. Accordingly, the second research question is as follows:

2. What are the elements of supportive communication in Al-Anon that the group members consider helpful and why are these elements considered helpful, according to the members?

In the third aim the focus shifts to the helping mechanisms of supportive communication in Al-Anon. This endeavour derives from the lack of knowledge about the mechanisms of supportive communication in general and builds on the theory of conversationally induced reappraisals (Burlinson & Goldsmith, 1998). Hence, the third objective is to detect the helping mechanisms of Al-Anon in terms of short-term effects of supportive communication and supportive communication mechanisms producing these short-term effects. The third research question addressed in this dissertation is as follows:

3. What are the helping mechanisms of Al-Anon's support from the members' perspectives, and how are these helping mechanisms associated with the supportive communication in Al-Anon?

Although Al-Anon attendance has been noted to improve the interpersonal relationship with the alcoholic, it is unclear which specific kind of support has resulted in this improvement or how such improvement manifests itself in the relationship. Thus, the fourth aim of this dissertation is to determine the effects that Al-Anon's supportive communication has on the partners' communication in the relationship with the alcoholic, and by extension, discover the effects that the partners' changed communication has had on the relationship more generally. Hence, as the third aim addressed the short-term effects of supportive communication, the final objective addresses the more long-term effects of Al-Anon's support. Thus, the fourth research question is as follows:

4. What kind of supportive communication in Al-Anon helps the partners of alcoholics change their communication towards the alcoholic, and what kind of effect has the change in the partners' communication had on the alcoholic-partner communication?

These research questions are approached using relevant data and appropriate analyses method, presented in the following section.

### 4.3 Data gathering

The Finnish Al-Anon was first contacted in 2011, and a permission was given to perform the research. This was important because the willingness of mutual-aid groups to participate in research has been known to vary (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). However, the final decision on participation was made by the individual groups and their members. The data were collected using three methods detailed in the following sub-chapters. To simplify, the gathered data present three different perspectives on the supportive communication in Al-Anon: support receiver's, support provider's, and third-party observer's perspectives (see Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992). These methods of data gathering can be seen as providing information about enacted, provided and perceived support (see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). The purpose of considering these varied perspectives is to generate a multi-voiced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This is important because the perceptions of different parties in support situations are known to vary (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Table 1 presents the use of research materials in each sub-study, including the more specific research questions posed for each study.

Study	Research questions	Research materials	Result chapter
I	RQ1. What types of verbal and non-verbal communication can be found in AI-Anon meetings? RQ2. What communicative acts and events compose the different types of supportive communication in AI-Anon meetings? RQ3. How do contextual features influence the supportive communication in AI-Anon meetings?	11 observations	5.1
II	RQ1. What elements of supportive communication in AI-Anon are evaluated as helpful by group members? RQ2. Why are these elements of supportive communication evaluated as helpful by group members?	20 interviews and 169 questionnaire answers	5.2
III	RQ1. What are the mechanisms of AI-Anon's supportive communication from the members' perspective? RQ2. How are the mechanisms of AI-Anon related to the group's supportive communication from the members' perspective?	20 interviews	5.3
IV	RQ1. What kinds of supportive communication at AI-Anon do the partners see as being helpful in changing their communication in their relationship with the alcoholic? RQ2. How do the partners see that they have changed their communication within their relationship with the alcoholic after their AI-Anon attendance? RQ3. How do the partners see that the change in their communication after AI-Anon has affected their relationship with the alcoholic?	19 interviews and 128 questionnaire answers	5.4

Table 1. Summary of sub-studies' research questions and research materials.

#### 4.3.1 Observations

The primary benefit of observation is that it allows the researcher to view the phenomena under investigation from the grass-roots level (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; for an extended discussion on observations, see Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011). Observations have been used in the study for both member and professionally led support groups (e.g., Atsushi, 2014; Cawyer & Smith-Dupre, 1995; Dennis et al., 2008; Hollihan & Riley, 1987; Peters & Skirton, 2013; Saulnier, 1994; Tregga & Brown, 2013). However, it appears that only few observational studies have utilised the supportive communication perspective (e.g., Alexander et al.,

2003; Coulson, Buchanan & Aubeeluck, 2007; Constantinos & Liu 2009; Malik & Coulson, 2010; Mo & Coulson, 2008), all of which have addressed online groups.

The first sub-study utilised observational data that focused on the supportive interactions in Al-Anon meetings. I attended 11 meetings of three Al-Anon groups. A general request to participate in the study was sent to all Al-Anon groups in Finland via the Al-Anon central service. The specific groups were selected on the basis of their own interest to participate and the groups' location in southern Finland that was convenient for me to attend as I lived in Helsinki.

Before the actual data-gathering observations, I practiced the note-taking technique in an open Al-Anon meeting. Then, I observed 11 closed Al-Anon meetings (open only to the loved ones of alcoholics), each including 8-12 members and lasting 1.5–2.5 hours. Because Al-Anon does not have a fixed membership, the characteristics of the members are based on my sensory observations. In general, the members in these meetings appeared to correspond to the average characteristics presented in the Al-Anon membership survey (Al-Anon, 2015a); for example, a majority of the participants were women with only two men attending the observed meetings.

I attended each meeting three or four times as a non-participant observer, which means I sat at the same table with the groups, taking notes by hand as imperceptibly as possible, but I did not directly participate in the meeting interaction (see Flick, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Thus, a non-participant observer is neither a member of the group nor a total outsider (Frey et al., 2000).

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), a central part of any observational research is making field notes and maintaining a research journal. The field notes were conducted following Lindlof and Taylor's (2011) suggestions; they were precise, overarching and transcribed immediately after each observed meeting. That is, I inconspicuously wrote quick notes by hand during the meetings and completed the notes right after each meeting, after which I transcribed the notes using a computer.

Although the method of making notes was unstructured, I consciously perceived the interactions in the meetings through the lens of supportive communication, and more specifically, the different types of supportive communication (see chapter 3.1). That is, I actively looked for different types of support in the interactions and made notes about the corresponding types of communicative acts (see Saville-Troike, 2003). Despite this, an inductive approach for the observation of new types of support and the effects of the Al-Anon context was also implemented. In addition, a research journal was maintained over the duration of the observational period to record more general thoughts concerning the fieldwork.

At the end of the last observed meetings, I asked a few of the group members



whether they felt that my presence had had an effect on the group behaviour. They replied that apart from the mild initial excitement, the meetings were conducted as usual. In addition, a draft of the results was shared with a few of the group members for validation of the content (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is further described in chapter 7.

The final observational data including the notes in the research journal were a total of 80 pages of typed transcriptions (12 point, single-spaced, Times New Roman font).

### 4.3.2 Questionnaire

Questionnaires have been previously used as a data collection method in support group studies (e.g., Bartlett & Coulson, 2011; Hatzidimitriadou, 2002). The primary benefit of collecting data through questionnaires is that it expands to a large audience (for other benefits, see Frey et al., 2000).

A questionnaire about the supportive processes in Al-Anon groups (Appendix 1) was sent to all interested groups in spring 2012 with help from the Al-Anon central service. The accompanying letter with the questionnaire stated that the purpose of the research was “to study Al-Anon’s peer support and its effects”. In the letter, it was also assured that the returned questionnaire sheets would be kept confidential and the results would be reported such that the respondents’ anonymity would be maintained. In autumn 2012, 188 questionnaires were returned, although not all respondents answered all the questions. Furthermore, the percentage of respondents is impossible to calculate as Al-Anon does not have a fixed membership system.

In the two sub-studies that utilised the questionnaire, each included only answers to a specific open-ended question (for more on open-ended questions, see Frey et al., 2000; Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The questionnaire also included a structured section consisting Likert scale questions about members’ views of supportive behaviours in the groups, which have been excluded from the dissertation. The questions in the structured section were generated as per the observational period in the Al-Anon meetings. The quantitative data from this part of the questionnaire were excluded as the approach of this dissertation is qualitative in nature.

The open-ended questions were placed after the structured section. In the second sub-study, the answers to the first open-ended question: “What in the other group members’ support is most important to you considering your coping?” were used as data. A total of 169 respondents answered this question, of which 164 (97%) were women, 138 (82%) were partners of alcoholics, 114

(68%) were aged over 51 years and 107 (63%) had been members of Al-Anon for more than six years.

The fourth sub-study focused on the partners of alcoholics. Hence, answers by the alcoholics' partners to the second open-ended question: "Is there something specific about the group members' support that especially helps or has, at some point, helped you in your efforts to change your behaviour toward your alcohol-dependent significant other?" were used as data. Of the returned questionnaires, 128 partners of alcoholics answered this question. Of these, 126 (98%) were women, 93 (72.7%) were aged over 51 years and 82 (64.1%) had been members of Al-Anon for more than six years.

The questionnaire data included 40 pages of typed transcriptions (12 point, single-spaced, Times New Roman font). A tentative analysis of the answers to the first open questionnaire question was conducted as a basis to develop the interview questions used in the second and third sub-studies. The interview procedure is detailed below.

### 4.3.3 Interviews

In addition to using open-ended survey questions, interviews have also been noted as a good data collection method when examining unexplored and sensitive phenomena (Frey et al., 2002). The interview data were used in sub-studies II, III and IV. Twenty members of Al-Anon, recruited with the help of the Al-Anon central service, were interviewed in 2013. The participants were informed that the purpose of the interviews was to gain information about the members' experiences of the peer support in Al-Anon and its effects.

Nineteen of the interviewees were partners of alcoholics (six were separated/divorced from the alcoholic, which was the initial reason for attendance, and two were bereaved). One had other relatives who suffered from alcoholism. The interviewees were all women who were 34–78 years old (avg. 59 years) and had been members of Al-Anon from anywhere between 10 months and 45 years (avg. 10 years). As the fourth study concentrated on the partners of alcoholics, only 19 interviews with the partners were used as data in the fourth sub-study. However, the range and average numbers of interviewees' ages and years in Al-Anon remained the same as in the 20 interview dataset.

The interviews were audio-recorded, lasted from 1 to 1.5 hours (the first parts of the interviews used singly in the fourth sub-study lasted from 0.5 hours to 1 hour 15 minutes), and were conducted in the interviewees' homes, on Al-Anon groups' meeting premises, private university premises, or in public libraries. At the beginning of the interviews, an oral consent for the interviews to be used as

data was obtained. The interviewees were also assured that the results would only be reported in a way that ensured anonymity.

The semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 2) had two parts, both of which addressed the members' experiences of supportive communication in Al-Anon (see also Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The first part of the interview frame included three themes: life before Al-Anon, life when joining Al-Anon, and life while being a member of Al-Anon. This format was chosen to detect the effects that Al-Anon attendance had had on the members' lives. More specifically, the three themes included questions about Al-Anon's role in the members' lives in general and especially about the effects that the group attendance had had on the members' relationships with the alcoholics. The interview format was also chosen because it resembles the structure of the stories shared in Al-Anon meetings (see Saulnier, 1994) and thus, is a familiar format for the members to discuss their experiences. In the fourth sub-study, only the first parts of the interviews were used as data.

The second part of the interviews included more specific themes concerning the supportive communication in Al-Anon. The themes were atmosphere, other group members, sharing, and others' experiences. These themes were generated on the basis of a preliminary analysis of data including answers to the first question in the questionnaire.

The general purpose of the interviews was to detect processes of change and the role of Al-Anon's supportive communication in that change. To understand the phenomena under investigation, I, as the interviewer, constantly strived to get to the practical level while asking members about their experiences. The purpose of this method was to determine the actual communicative behaviours underlying the more abstract descriptions of interviewees' experiences. For example, when an interviewee talked about feeling that she was accepted in the group, I asked what in the interviewee's opinion generated this kind of feeling at the meetings. I also asked the interviewees to give examples of the actual communication experienced as well as the typical ways of communicating in specific situations. That is, as it was sometimes difficult for the interviewees to remember exact behaviours, I asked them to describe what might have typically happened in a given situation.

In addition to focusing on concrete communicative behaviours, I constantly inquired how Al-Anon attendance and the changes reported as outcomes were connected to each other in the interviewees' perspective. For example, when an interviewee talked about experiencing enhanced mood in a meeting, I inquired what it was in the meeting that generated this kind of effect. Or, when an interviewee stated that Al-Anon made her less argumentative with her husband, I asked how this change in behaviour was facilitated by Al-Anon.

The final interview data included 240 pages (the first parts of the interviews

used singly in the fourth sub-study included 175 pages) of typed transcriptions (12 point, single-spaced, Times New Roman font). A research journal was also maintained during the interviews. In the journal, I recorded all my thoughts about the interviews that came to my mind during the interview period. This helped me constantly reflect on my personal thoughts and remain connected with the theoretical base that the study stems from.

## 4.4 Analyses

Separate thematic analyses were conducted in each of the sub-studies. According to Manning and Kunkel (2014), thematic analysis is well-suited for unexplored topics, such as the phenomena explored in this dissertation. Thematic analyses were conducted with the help of the computer software Nvivo (see Bazeley, 2007). However, I manually conducted all the analyses and Nvivo was solely used as an aid in handling large data sets. Nvivo allows the researcher to simultaneously work with several data sources, make in-text notes and link memos to the data transcripts that ease the analysis process. During each of the analyses, I also maintained an audit trail to document the phases of the analysis and a more general journal to record the more intuitive observations of the coding process. The journal including the more general observations was also included in the analyses.

The analyses in all four sub-studies were conducted following Richards' (2005) and Guest, MacQueen and Namey's (2012) suggestions. Both authors provide descriptions of practical procedures on how to perform an analysis. However, as Guest et al. (2012) state, the most important point is to provide a detailed account of the procedures that produced the results. The terms used in the forthcoming sub-chapters describing the four analyses in each sub-study are provided by Richards (2005). In Richards' (2005) terms, the actual coding process begins by developing *topical* or *descriptive codes* that help arrange research materials such that they are more easily handled. After this more superficial coding, the materials in the develop codes are applied with more *analytic coding*. According to Richards (2005), this phase includes noticing the interesting parts of the data and asking why a particular part is important in terms of the study's purpose. The analysis of each of sub-study is described in detail below.

### 4.4.1 Study I

The aim of the first sub-study was to detect the types of supportive communication occurring in Al-Anon meetings and how the contextual features of Al-Anon affect

the supportive communication in the meetings. The study utilised observational data in the form of transcribed field notes and a research journal. That is, both the field notes and research journal were included in the analysis. It is also worth mentioning that, especially in this first sub-study, by using observations as a data-gathering method, the process of analysis had already clearly begun in the field (see Frey et al., 2000). That is, as I observed the meetings, I already began organising the observations into working models of the phenomenon under investigation, which I repeatedly tested in the forthcoming observations.

Once I gathered all of the data from the observed meetings and read it as well as the research journal several times, I began coding the data as per the four theoretical types of support that had directed my observations (emotional, informational, esteem, and network support). The choice between the different types of support was made according to the topical focus of the message. Nevertheless, openness to new types of support was maintained in the analysis, although no support type that would not fit the existing theoretical types emerged.

After this topical coding, the contents of the support type codes were inductively analysed. In this more analytic phase, the data were broken down into specific interactions observed in the meetings, which were coded again into more generic communicative acts and events (see Saville-Troike, 2003). For example, in the emotional support category, a data fragment in which a member began her story by stating that she identified with the previous speaker, was coded into the generic code “expressing understanding”. After this, the contextual elements that had an effect on supportive communication in the meetings were inductively determined. This process primarily utilised the more general notes in the research journal.

Finally, a draft of the results was presented to a few of the group members for validation of the content (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Apart from suggesting few changes in the terms used, the results were confirmed by the members.

#### 4.4.2 Study II

The aim of the second sub-study was to determine the elements of supportive communication perceived as helpful by the members and why these elements are considered helpful. The data included the transcripts of the interviews and answers to the first question in the questionnaire. The questionnaire data were first exposed to a preliminary analysis to create interview questions for the second part of the interviews. However, in the final analysis, the interview and questionnaire data were analysed together.

The actual analysis phase began by reading the interviews and questionnaire

answers and making notes and memos about the first-hand impressions. Then, the data were coded into preliminary codes. In practice, the questionnaire data provided more abstract concepts such as “peer support” and the interview data deepened these statements by providing descriptions of, for example, peer support as a certain form of supportive communication and explanations of why it was considered helpful.

After a more generic reading, the data were divided into topical codes, such as “equality”. Following this process of topical coding, more analytic coding was performed. The developed topical codes were arranged under higher-level codes describing the four elements of supportive communication (support network, support source, support situation and support form) considered important in Al-Anon. For example, the topical code “equality” was incorporated under the more analytic higher-level code “support source” since equality refers to the benefit of having equal peers as providers of support in Al-Anon. Simultaneously, the specificity of the sub-codes under these higher-level codes was increased to precisely determine the specific communication constituting the codes. In addition to describing communication, the reasons determining these elements as helpful were included in the coding scheme.

#### 4.4.3 Study III

The aim of the third sub-study was to identify the helping mechanism of Al-Anon and how they are created in the groups’ supportive communication. The helping mechanisms of Al-Anon were considered as the short-term effects of groups’ supportive processes. The data in this sub-study included the transcripts of the interviews.

Following a more general reading and note making, the data were first arranged into topical codes, such as “first meetings”, which described the supportive communication involved in the generation of the short-term effects of Al-Anon. Then, the contents of the topical codes were coded more analytically. For example, the first meetings were often experienced as generating a sense of relief as the members had been told that they were not responsible for causing their loved one’s alcoholism. Accordingly, the topical codes were then rearranged under more analytic codes representing the meaning of these codes. The topical code “first meetings” was placed under the higher-level category labelled as “I did not cause the alcoholism”. Thereafter, the level of abstraction was raised again and the developed codes were incorporated under more abstract themes. For example, the “I did not cause the alcoholism” code was included under the theme “developing a new story” as it was part of the reappraisals generated in Al-Anon’s supportive communication.

At this point, these higher-level codes were also distinguished on the basis of communication behaviours described in these codes. That is, “developing a new story” included communication that was described as primarily operating with direct verbal communication (i.e., content of the talks). Thus, it was placed under one of the two final themes representing the communicative medium generating the mechanisms (sub-codes): the content level of supportive communication. The other final theme was called the relationship level of supportive communication. Hence, the final coding scheme included two main themes exemplifying the two distinct levels of supportive communication generating the helping mechanisms of Al-Anon.

#### 4.4.4 Study IV

The aim of the fourth sub-study was to investigate the effects that the alcoholics’ partners’ Al-Anon attendance had had on their communication in the relationship with the alcoholic, and what kind of effect the changed communication had on the relationship more generally. In this study, only the 19 interviews with the alcoholics’ partners and only the first parts of those interviews were used as data. In addition, the answers to the second question in the questionnaire were used as data.

In the analysis of the third sub-study, the parts in which the interviewees specifically discuss their relationship with the alcoholic had been separated from the rest of the data. The analysis in this final sub-study began by reading these excerpts and making notes.

The first step to coding was dividing the interview data into two descriptive categories, “relationship before Al-Anon” and “relationship after joining Al-Anon”, to reveal the possible changes in the relationship that may have occurred as a result of the partners’ Al-Anon attendance. Thereafter, the data coded into these descriptive codes were broken down into more detailed topical codes and rearranged under analytic core-codes. In essence, these final codes represented the change experienced by the interviewees and are thus presented together as counterparts (e.g., “from co-dependency to drawing boundaries”) in the write-up of the results.

Next, the questionnaire data were analysed to determine the elements of supportive communication in Al-Anon that had especially helped partners change their communication towards their alcoholic partners. The analysis was performed in an inductive manner, starting from the formulation of topical codes representing the forms of supportive communication that helped the partners change their communication in the relationship with the alcoholic, to rearranging

the topical codes into more upper level categories of support in Al-Anon. The interview data were also coded into the category dealing with the supportive processes in Al-Anon. The benefit here was the ability to test the developed coding scheme against new data. The interview data provided fundamentally similar contents as the questionnaire data.

Finally, the number of participants that the main codes were applied to was counted to demonstrate the salience of the codes in the data (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014).



## 5 RESULTS SUMMARY

The main results of the four sub-studies are summarised in this chapter (for a more detailed description of the results, see the original publications). These results aim to answer the four general research questions posed in chapter 4.2. In the final sub-chapter, these results are drawn together by presenting a comprehensive model of supportive communication in Al-Anon.

### 5.1 Types and contextual features of supportive communication in Al-Anon

The aim of the first sub-study was to detect the types of supportive communication in Al-Anon meetings and the effects that Al-Anon as a context has on supportive processes in the meetings.

The results reveal that the supportive communication in Al-Anon meetings includes emotional, informational, esteem and social network support. *Emotional support* included using humour, expressing hope and encouragement, showing understanding for the members' difficult experiences and emphasising the group's confidentiality through, for example, welcoming words reminding members about the confidential nature of the meetings. Emotional support in Al-Anon also included nonverbal communication of support such as expressions of listening and agreement. *Informational support* included suggestions about how to achieve enhanced well-being as well as teachings and allegories used to make sense of the members' current situations. *Esteem support* included communication to relieve guilt, compliments to members about, for instance, proceeding well in the path of recovery, and expressions of gratitude to other group members for their support. Finally, *network support* included expressions emphasising the group's significance in the recovery process.

The contextual features of the Al-Anon meetings that affected the abovementioned supportive communication included *the warm atmosphere* in the meetings that was created, for example, through members' nonverbal communication and the subjects' discussions during the meetings that generated a receptive space for supportive processes. The *manner of interaction* in the meetings, including the turn-by-turn sharing of members' personal experiences

and absence of direct commenting on others' stories, further amplified the role of nonverbal communication and made verbal supportive communication indirect in the meetings. This manner of interaction also led to the overlapping roles of support providers and receivers in the meetings. That is, by sharing a difficult experience a member could simultaneously express similarity and thus, support previous speakers as well as seek support.

Finally, the supportive communication was characterised by features of *the 12-step ideology*, such as the notion of a power greater than oneself, self-responsibility and the group's importance in the process of recovery. The ideology also shaped the form of the stories shared in the meetings. That is, the different types of support played specific roles in the stories, which together represent the "big story" of Al-Anon.

## 5.2 Elements of helpful supportive communication in Al-Anon

The aim of the second sub-study was to determine the elements of supportive communication in Al-Anon that the members themselves considered helpful and why these elements are considered helpful by the members.

The results revealed four elements of Al-Anon's supportive communication that were deemed important by the members, which together are characterised by the underlying philosophy that helping others ultimately equals helping oneself. First, Al-Anon formed *a positive community* (support network) that provides a solution to feelings of "otherness": loneliness, isolation, shame and low self-esteem, all described as typical feelings for the significant others of alcoholics. The members considered Al-Anon as a group of people to belong and meet and as a source of functional communication compared to the distorted home life. In addition, the mere awareness of support availability, the fact that the group was seen as the primary unit and there was no pressure to develop friendships were seen as important elements of Al-Anon.

Another defining element of Al-Anon's support was the *parity of members* (support source) that diminished the members' feelings of inferiority, inequality and miscomprehension. It was reckoned that the equality among the members was maintained through meeting practises such as the meeting structure in which everyone was given equal time to talk. This equality diminished the role division between the ones giving and those receiving support and obligated all of the members to take responsibility in supporting others. For example, service work was considered an important way of contributing to mutual good and thus, assuming the right kind of responsibility. It was also stated that the similarity among members made every member an equally reliable source of

support and generated special understanding that cannot be found anywhere else.

Further, the *Al-Anon premises* (support situation) were deemed important as they provided a concrete, safe place for supportive processes as a response to the taboo nature of alcoholism in the society. The members said that things such as the meeting structure, topics discussed and conception that others' good equals one's own maintained communication in Al-Anon meetings as accepting, safe and sincere. The positive atmosphere in the meetings was explained also to be generated through, for example, nonverbal communication, such as accepting smiles and expressions of understanding. The aspiration to maintain a safe meeting atmosphere was also visible such way that members' personal conflicts were not partook and thus encouraged by others.

Finally, the method of *sharing experiences* (support form) was stated to expose members' stories to change and provide an opportunity to support others. This form of support was reckoned to respect the subjectivity of the members' experiences and thus, aid members' personal processing of the complicated issues. In addition to reappraising, sharing aloud also meant that the burden of the experience was shared. The members noted that it was important to learn the skill of listening as others' experiences were good sources of knowledge, hope and comparison. In addition, sharing taught the art of speaking publically, which was thought to enhance the members' self-esteem. The reciprocal sharing also partook in the creation of a network, source, and situation of support in Al-Anon, as outlined above.

### 5.3 Helping mechanisms of supportive communication in Al-Anon

The aim of the third sub-study was to determine the association between supportive communication and helping mechanisms in Al-Anon.

The results show that the mechanisms of Al-Anon's supportive communication operated on two levels: content and relationships. The level of relationships essentially operated on the relational meaning of communication, thus shaping the members' experiences of themselves and the prevailing situation. The interviewees stated that a *sense of belonging* in the group was generated by listening to others' stories that were similar and through the knowledge of the unconditional availability of support. In general, the interviewees felt safe and genuinely accepted and cared for in Al-Anon. However, they also stated that there was no pressure to socialise with others. Through the supportive communication at the relationship level, the members were also able to *see themselves in relation to others* in Al-Anon as they were able to view their own personal degrees of recovery compared to those of others, experience themselves as helping others and learn

to tolerate differing views by listening to others. According to the interviewees, the third mechanism operating at the relationship level included interactions in Al-Anon that enabled the members to *experience self-efficacy* through, for instance, taking up service work or speaking publically in the meetings, both indicating that the member took responsibility of the group as a whole, and thus, for oneself.

The level of content operated essentially with language and the sharing of experiences, thus helping members reconstruct their stories into stories of recovery. The content level of supportive communication in Al-Anon included the *development of a new story* by explaining the disease concept of alcoholism, putting things into the right perspective and generating hope. Humour was, for example, used as a method to reshape the members' stories into less serious ones. According to the members, the content level was also involved in the members' aim to *move attention to themselves* and their own roles in the current situation and direct their caring actions to themselves instead of the alcoholic. Finally, the content level of supportive communication in Al-Anon also partook in *finding building blocks for recovery*, such as learning the 12-step program and gaining words needed to understand and work on the members' experiences.

#### 5.4 Al-Anon attendance in relation to members' communication with their alcoholic romantic partners

The aim of the fourth sub-study was to shed light on how the supportive communication in Al-Anon helps the partners of alcoholics change their communication towards their alcoholic partners, how the partners' changed communication affects the alcoholic-partner relationship and what kind of supportive communication in Al-Anon specifically helped in making these changes.

The results of the study showed that in Al-Anon, informational and emotional support both helped the members change their communication towards the alcoholic. *Informational support* that helped change the partners' communication included educating the members about ways to deal with the alcoholic, such as using the 12-step program as a practical tool while interacting with the alcoholic. *Emotional support* that helped in the behavioural changes included developing the feeling of empowerment from receiving positive regard from the group, which also spread to the home life, and having the group's support at all time what. In addition to these forms of support, Al-Anon provided *an arena to practice interpersonal skills*, such as the skill of listening and turning the focus to oneself, which could also be used in the relationship with the alcoholic.

After joining Al-Anon, the partners tried to shift their communication towards the alcoholic *from controlling to acceptance*. This meant that the partners strived to

restrain from controlling the alcoholic's drinking through communication such as threats and blackmail and instead attempted to accept the current situation by not intervening in the alcoholic's actions. The interviewees also aimed to move *from co-dependency to drawing boundaries*, which means that they attempted to change their out-of-control, or in contrast conflict-avoiding, communication into a more self-aware and constructive manner of interacting with the alcoholic. The interviewees also stated that they began taking more space in the relationship and paying more attention to their own well-being. However, changing one's deep-rooted ways of communication was stated as very difficult.

The partners' changed communication had also affected the relationships more generally such that the focus of the relationships had started shifting *from the alcoholic's drinking to the relational partners' own separate lives*. This meant that, previously, the communication in the relationship circled around the alcoholic's drinking, but with the help of Al-Anon, the partners began shifting their attention to themselves. The interviewees stated that by generating inner peace, this type of separateness eased the relationship with the alcoholic. The interviewees also explained that the relationship had undergone a shift *from a lack of communication into more clarified understanding of the status of the relationship*. Indeed, since the interviewees previously felt that the communication with the alcoholic was in many ways inadequate, Al-Anon seemed to enhance the communication or enable the members to engage in intrapersonal communication that had made the status of the relationship clearer. For some couples, this clarification generated enhanced closeness, whereas it made some others more distant than before, even to the point of separation or divorce.

## 5.5 Comprehensive model of supportive communication in Al-Anon

Drawing on the findings of the four sub-studies presented above, I have outlined a comprehensive model of supportive communication in Al-Anon (Figure 1).

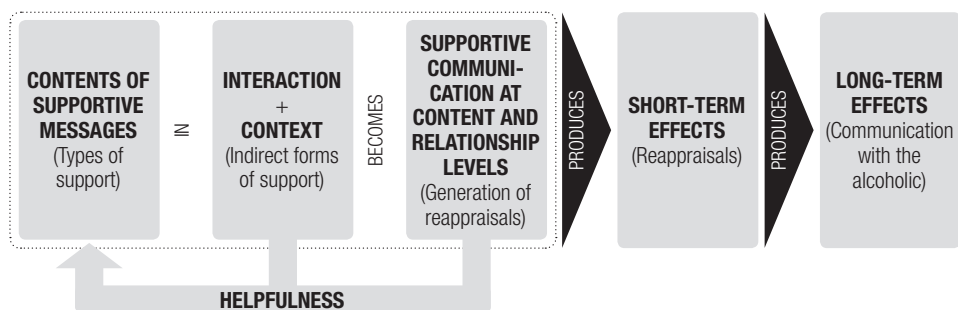


Figure 1. Comprehensive model of supportive communication in Al-Anon.

This model exemplifies the different parts of the supportive communication process in Al-Anon as clearly divided theoretical constructs and shows the mutual relations of the different parts of the process. Thus, the model helps locate the parts of the supportive communication process that were the focus of each of the four sub-studies: how they are placed in the broader process of supportive interactions and which are the effective elements or what is being affected. My objective in presenting the model is also to illustrate the interactional and contextual essence of supportive communication in Al-Anon and to demonstrate the usefulness of the supportive communication's theoretical foundations for the study of mutual-aid groups.

The model begins with the content of supportive messages (Box 1), which were the focus of the first sub-study. However, these messages are essentially determined as supportive through their existence as parts of supportive interactions and in the specific context of the mutual-aid group (Box 2). In other words, a statement such as, "alcoholism is a disease", is identified as informational support when it is uttered as part of the interactional chain where the origin of the loved one's alcoholism is discussed. In addition, the context of the mutual-aid group further defines the statement as supportive.

As the next stage of the model shows, it is the supportive interaction in the specific context of the mutual-aid group that allows for the relationship level of supportive communication to emerge in Al-Anon (Box 3), a result of the third sub-study. That is, in addition to being defined as informational support, the statement, "alcoholism is a disease", may also indirectly convey a message of acceptance. In other words, along with the explicit meaning through content, the interactional and contextual elements of the support situation add indirect meanings to the message. Hence, discussing the disease concept of alcoholism in the context of 12-step ideology may also communicate to the members that, because alcoholism is a disease, the friends and family members of alcoholics are not to be blamed for causing it, but instead, because of having this disease in the family, are to be welcomed in the group of similar others all brave enough to face their problems. In this way, supportive messages operating at the relationship level also reconstruct the receivers' views about the prevailing situation. This process can also be seen as the interactional generation of reappraisals.

In addition, the helpfulness or quality of supportive messages that were addressed in the second sub-study is also determined through the interactional meaning of the message in the special context of the mutual-aid group. In other words, the statement, "alcoholism is a disease", could be considered as especially helpful when presented after a newcomer shares her guilt-imbued story of fearing to have caused her husband's alcoholism. Moreover, the context of the mutual-aid group, where everyone's personal processing is valued, further determines the

form of the phrase, that is, a general statement not specifically directed to anyone, as a helpful way of supporting a new-comer.

In sum, as an aggregate, the results show that the special context of Al-Anon emphasises the kinds of support that does not explicitly hold its meaning in itself, but instead is indirect and thus, is defined as well as evaluated only as parts of reciprocal interactions and the surrounding context. This type of support appears especially important in generating the kinds of interactions that operate at the relationship level of supportive communication.

Thus far, the model has described the here and now supportive processes in Al-Anon. The next stages of the model present the effects of supportive communication in Al-Anon. That is, the supportive communication at the content and relationship (often simultaneous) levels produces the active ingredients (e.g., Moos, 2008) or helping mechanisms (e.g., Lieberman, 1976) of mutual-aid groups (Box 4) also described in the third sub-study. Here, I have conceptualised these mechanisms as the short-term effects of supportive communication. They can also be viewed as reappraisals. Finally, it is these short-term effects, such as interpersonal learning, that ultimately produce the long-term effects outside of the support situation, and specifically in the case of the fourth sub-study, the effects on the partners' communication with the alcoholic (Box 5).

In the next chapter, the most important observations made on the basis of these results are discussed in detail. The reader is encouraged to use the above-presented model as an aid to view the discussed elements as parts of the comprehensive model of supportive communication in Al-Anon.

## 6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, two main topics of further interest arising from the results are detailed. The first focuses on the interactional and contextual essence of supportive communication in Al-Anon that was especially visible in the indirect forms and relationship level of supportive communication in Al-Anon. The second topic of discussion focuses on the effects that supportive communication in Al-Anon has on communication with the alcoholic partner and thus draws attention towards the outcomes outside of the relationship in which the supportive communication originally takes place. After more closely examining these two conclusions, concluding remarks and the benefits of utilising the supportive communication perspective to study mutual-aid groups, are presented in the final sub-chapter.

### 6.1 Interactional and contextual essence of supportive communication in Al-Anon

#### 6.1.1 Indirect forms of supportive communication in Al-Anon

The notion of helping oneself by helping others in Al-Anon appeared as a defining feature of the Al-Anon context as well as the interactions in the groups. Indeed, it could be argued that the stories shared in the meetings are defined as support only as they are shared in line with other stories in the context of mutual-aid group. In addition to the content type of support, through the contextual and interactional elements of Al-Anon, the stories became attached with other, more indirect meanings of support. More importantly, the indirectness of supportive interactions in Al-Anon served as a polite and face-saving manner of supporting others. Similarly, Goldsmith (2004) states that support that is not explicitly defined as support, that bolsters equality among the parties of the support-giving situation and does not threaten the support receiver's self-esteem and sense of autonomy, may be especially beneficial in some cases (see also Goldsmith, 1994; MacGeorge et al., 2011).

Also peers as the source of support contributed to dissolving the boundary between the ones providing and those receiving support in Al-Anon and thus,



enhanced the indirectness of support. As opposed to close friends and family members, peers may be preferred as support providers when the support receiver is faced with a sensitive and stigmatising issue, such as the alcoholism of a loved one (Wright & Rains, 2013; Wright & Miller, 2010; see also Smith, 2011). Indeed, Orford, Velleman, Copello et al. (2010) discuss studies dealing with individuals affected by a family member's alcoholism and state that support from others in similar situations is especially valued.

In addition to enabling everyone to experience oneself as capable of providing support, the actual provision of support was also considered beneficial to the members in the groups. That is, providing support to others was a way of proceeding with the path to recovery and thus, bolstering one's self-esteem. Similarly, Schwartz and Sendor (1999) found that peers suffering from multiple sclerosis and trained to give support to others, experienced improvements in their confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem, depression and general role functioning. These observations emphasise the meaning of supportive interactions instead of focusing on the receiver's perspective. The importance of supportive interactions or conversations has also been emphasised by other researchers (e.g., Goldsmith & Burleson, 1998; High & Solomon, 2014; Jones & Bodie, 2014).

Indeed, it appears that instead of distinguishing between the providers and receivers of support, the support of Al-Anon includes the interactional parties meeting within a universal level of experience. That is, although the member playing the primary role of a support provider may not share the exact same life circumstances with the one in need of support, the interaction may help the provider to, for example, make sense of similar feelings felt in another situation, and more importantly, express to the recipient how she or he also benefits from the interaction. In essence, this type of "support through similarity" includes sharing the foundational fragility inherent in being a human being. In a similar vein, Virtanen (2015) conceptualises the need for support as a means to fill a void in one's life experience and the expression of that void as an expression of vulnerability common to all human beings.

On the basis of these observations, the more indirect ways of support should also clearly be understood as forms of supportive communication. This being said, it has also been argued that a clear expression of supportive intentions contributes to the helpfulness of support (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Interestingly, it appears that in Al-Anon, the same contextual and interactional elements that blur the role division between the ones receiving and those providing support also clearly define sharing as support. Hence, the support in Al-Anon can be understood as being both explicit and intentional as it takes place as part of an interactional chain in the context of mutual-aid group, but also disguised and implicit as the support is executed through the members' sharing of personal

stories. In other words, it is clear to the members that Al-Anon is a supportive community and that the meaning of personal sharing is also to support others, but at the same time, the members are not delineated into rigid roles of support receivers or providers or obligated to reciprocate the support directly to anyone. That is, although Al-Anon can be seen as including a norm of reciprocity (Zajdow, 2002), the support can be reciprocated, for example, to the ones joining the group later on, thus helping others in their early stage of recovery.

Here, it is worth asking whether this same indirectness of support in Al-Anon can be a negative experience for some members, such as for those who choose to not stay in Al-Anon. From the perspective of supportive communication, it can be speculated that for a newcomer who is unfamiliar with the group's contextual and interactional elements, these same elements may be perceived as strange and rigid. This could be supported by the fact that the most influential theory in the realm of supportive communication over the past few decades, the person-centred theory, has traditionally assumed that good quality support is sophisticated in the way that it explicitly acknowledges and legitimises the personal feelings of the support receiver (Burlison, 1994; Jones & Bodie, 2014). In Al-Anon, however, instead of directing the support explicitly towards any one member, the members are connected with each other through the sharing of similar experiences and a shared understanding of the Al-Anon context.

Similarly, Jones and Bodie (2014) recently suggested that, in addition to person-centeredness, we should view supportive interactions from the viewpoint of position-centeredness. This means that skilful support should also include an expression of the shared reality of people in the support situation. According to Jones & Bodie (2014, p. 377),

...position-centred talk may range from relational knowledge that consists of scripted role-based behaviour (e.g., normative expressions of sympathy between a sales clerk and a customer) to knowledge that reflects intimate, relational information a supporter possesses about the recipient (e.g., knowing that a recipient is sensitive to touch).

In this way, it can be argued that in Al-Anon, the interactional chains in the shared context of Al-Anon (12-step program, being an alcoholic's significant other, etc.) allow the ostensible rigidity and lack of verbal immediacy of the group's communication to be perceived as beneficial. In other words, the interlocutors' situational understandings need to be acknowledged when defining the contents of the messages as supportive and especially when evaluating the quality of these messages. Interestingly, Jones and Bodie (2014) suggest that the nonverbal expressions of support might especially reflect the position-centeredness of support. Thus, although person- and position-centeredness may have certain operational and conceptual differences, they are clearly affiliated with each other

in terms of supportive communication (Jones & Bodie, 2014). The concept of position-centeredness is intriguing and calls for further research.

To conclude, these findings bring forth the value of more indirect ways of supportive communication in which the roles of the support providers and receivers are not clearly defined. The benefits of supportive interactions for all parties of the support situation can be utilised when designing support programs for individuals with emotional burdens. In particular, individuals suffering from stigmatising conditions could benefit from the more indirect forms of supportive communication. Indeed, certain situations call for supportive interactions that embrace equality and thus, do not include the acknowledgement of the ones having and the ones lacking. The indirect forms of supportive communication were also those which especially partook in the generation of the relationship level of supportive communication in Al-Anon, an issue discussed in the following section.

### 6.1.2 Relationship level of supportive communication in Al-Anon

As stated above, the contextual and interactional features of Al-Anon, such as the interactional manner of the meetings and anonymity among members, contributed to the indirect forms of support. This indirectness also diminished the explicit influence of social relations in Al-Anon. Ablon (1974), for example, states that Al-Anon concentrates on information sharing instead of relationships among members. Similar results emphasising the prevalence of informational support have been presented when considering mutual-aid and support groups (see Alexander et al., 2003; Coulson et al., 2007; Constantinos & Liu, 2009; Mo & Coulson, 2008). However, the results of this dissertation imply that these same contextual and interactional elements of Al-Anon actually enable an appropriate, although often implicit, relational level of supportive communication to emerge.

Indeed, the second key conclusion, especially from the sub-studies relying on the interview data, is that in addition to the content of support in Al-Anon, the way members were made to feel about themselves was an important part of the groups' supportive processes. Similarly, VanLear et al. (2005) suggest that sharing in mutual-aid groups reshapes the members' identities by ignoring inappropriate self-presentations and presenting contrasting self-disclosures that include warnings against inappropriate ideas. In this way, the situational reappraising in the relationship level is done indirectly and discreetly, without the members feeling rejected.

By relationship level of supportive communication, I mean more than emotion-focused support (see Burleson, 2003). It is the co-construction of more

positive situational understandings in which the contents of the messages can be either informational or emotional. Although the relationship between the support provider and receiver has already been acknowledged as an element affecting support outcomes (Burlison, 2009), I suggest that the influence of relational communication ought to be broadened. In essence, since supportive interactions are under investigation, it is not the relationship, but the interactional construction of that relationship that matters the most. In other words, the relationship between the interlocutors in the support situation becomes meaningful especially through the supportive communication at the relationship level that (re)constructs the personal identities of these interlocutors.

The theory of conversationally induced reappraisals (Goldsmith & Burlison, 1998) is particularly relevant here, as it was used as a theoretical aid in the third sub-study to understand the association between the short-term effects of Al-Anon and mechanism of supportive communication producing these effects. According to the theory, the helping mechanism of supportive communication is based on the generation of reappraisals through supportive interactions. Interestingly, Jones and Bodie (2014) suggest that the theory of conversationally induced reappraisals could be utilised in motivational interviewing, which is often used to spark change in addictive behaviours. Interestingly, Sarpavaara (2015) describes the role of clients' reasons for change during motivational interviewing sessions and states that social and contextual elements are of great importance in terms of generating change. Indeed, this dissertation shows that, in addition to the content of the supportive messages, the relationship level of supportive communication also generates reappraisals in Al-Anon. The role of the relationship level of supportive communication calls for further elaboration in terms of generating reappraisals.

The importance of the relationship level of supportive communication as part of the non-content elements of the support situation (see Burlison, 2009) also resonates with the recently developed dual-process model of supportive communication (e.g., Bodie, Burlison & Jones, 2012; Bodie & Burlison, 2008; Burlison, 2009; Burlison, 2010; Holmstrom et al., 2015). The model suggests that when the content of supportive message is not thoroughly scrutinised by the support receiver, other contextual elements of the support situation, such as the channel of support or interlocutors' mutual relationship, affect the support's helpfulness. On the basis of the findings of this dissertation, it can be theorised that the indirect forms of support as a result of the contextual and interactional elements of Al-Anon might be especially important to members who do not relate with the contents of the meetings' talks. In a similar manner, Timko et al. (2014) suggest that those who drop out from Al-Anon may do so simply because they do not identify with the 12-step program. Hence, 12-step groups would benefit

from clearly understanding the meaning of the relationship level of supportive communication in the groups.

In addition to the indirect forms of verbal support, the nonverbal messages of support were an important part of the relationship level of supportive communication in Al-Anon. However, the nonverbal aspects of support groups have been rarely noted in previous studies. For example, although the 12-step groups are known to value the skill of listening (Denzin, 1987), listening in the meetings appears to not be extensively studied. In fact, listening and nonverbal communication have only recently been included in supportive communication research in general (see Bodie & Jones, 2012; Bodie, Vickery & Gearhartt, 2013; Jones, 2011; Jones & Bodie, 2014). In particular, in supportive communication research conducted in the United States, verbal messages of support have often been at the centre of investigations. Interestingly, in Finland, listening has emerged as an important subject of speech communication research (e.g., Ala-Kortesmaa, 2015; Virtanen, 2015; Virtanen & Isotalus, 2014), suggesting that there may be some cultural implications that affect these observations (see also Virtanen, 2015). Face-to-face meeting mutual-aid groups, where the role of listening is especially emphasised, might also be a good place for the study of listening.

Indeed, although the recent expansion of online support groups has captured the attention of a growing number of communication scholars (Dennis et al., 2008), I encourage communication researchers to also pay attention to more traditional face-to-face groups, as they clearly include supportive elements, such as expressions of listening, that are not directly transferrable into online settings (for further discussions of the subject, see Roth & Tan, 2007; Setoyama, Yamazaki & Nakayama, 2011; VanLear et al., 2005). Recent research for example suggests that online and face-to-face mutual-aid groups could be helpful to people depending on coping strategies they are engaged in (Wright & Rains, 2014). The reasons for preferring face-to-face or online support group contexts in terms of supportive communication call for further investigation.

Finally, there was one specific element that the relationship level of support in Al-Anon was especially engaged in: the generation of a sense of community and belonging. In the supportive communication literature, this kind of support is called network support (e.g., Cutrona & Suhr, 1994). It is notable that in Al-Anon, the network support was indeed often provided in indirect and implicit ways, mainly by stressing the importance of the group and bravery of members for dealing with their problems (as compared to those others who do not face their problems). As a result, in the first sub-study utilising observations that were more focused on direct messages of support, network support was not as clearly visible as in the later studies that adopted members' personal accounts of supportive interactions in Al-Anon.

Similar observations about the importance of the sense of community in 12-step groups have also been made by other researchers. For example, DeLucia, Bergman, Formoso and Weinberg (2015) in their work based on Narcotics Anonymous, suggest that the psychological sense of community that manifests itself as social support at the micro-level can be a beneficial element of mutual-aid groups (see also Ablon, 1982a). Based on this dissertation's results, these micro-level processes of social support generating the sense of community could be conceptualised as network support and located as operating on the relationship level of supportive communication.

However, network support appears as an understudied type of support. From the perspective of this dissertation, network support seems especially relevant in group contexts such as mutual-aid groups. Thus, support groups might be a good place to start for a closer analysis on the phenomenon of network support. The importance of network support should also be clearly understood in healthcare settings when developing forms of social support for clients. For example, network support processes could be paid special attention in several forms of group activities in hospitals and rehabilitation centres to strengthen the members' positive self-concepts. In physical rehabilitation-groups, for instance, instructors could also strive to enhance network support processes among group members. Bringing together several functions in rehabilitation groups would also be a resource-wise way of enhancing the provision of social support for patients. Moreover, a group with a primary function other than mutual support can provide a face-saving way of receiving social support for patients suffering from stigmatising conditions.

Finally, an important implication of the relationship level of supportive communication was also the fact that it partook in the generation of reappraisals as the short-term effects of support in Al-Anon. These reappraisals, together with those generated at the content level of support, affected the partners' communication with the alcoholic. The next chapter focuses on these effects as the long-term relational effects of supportive communication in Al-Anon.

## 6.2 Long-term relational effects of supportive communication in Al-Anon

The findings show that changes that occurred in the members' ways of communicating in the relationship with the alcoholic resulted from the members focusing on making themselves feel better instead of explicitly aiming to enhance the relationship. According to the Al-Anon ideology, the problems of the significant others of alcoholics are indeed their own and should be solved on a personal level. However, the findings of the fourth sub-study indicated that the partners

of alcoholics perceived Al-Anon attendance as helpful also in their efforts to cope with the relationship with the alcoholic. Similarly, DeLucia et al. (2015) state that attending a mutual-aid group may correct harmful developmental trajectories in interpersonal relationships outside of the group. According to Holmila (2003), the focal point of this type of coping is often not the explicit changes in the relationship, but rather the process of redefining the status of the relationship.

Interestingly, the Al-Anon approach of “detachment” in terms of the alcoholic-partner relationship appears to be seldom shared by the treatment programs for alcoholics that involve the family members. The ultimate reason for the family members to change their communication methods in these programs is often to get the alcoholic to consent to treatment or support the alcoholic’s sobriety (e.g., Barber & Gilbertson, 1997; Orford et al., 2013). Although these programs, and the research reports discussing them, also often note the importance of the family members’ well-being, based on this dissertation’s results, I believe that the family members of alcoholics would benefit from treatment that exclusively presents the well-being of the significant others as the sole reason for changes. Although the significant others often play an important role in terms of the alcoholic’s recovery (e.g., Sarpavaara, 2014), this should not be the motivating factor for the significant others changing their communication towards the alcoholic. Indeed, there appears to be a thin but significant line between the intent of changing one’s ways of communication to making one’s own life more manageable and the intent of changing one’s communication to making others behave as one wishes. Thus, it is crucial that those offering support to the significant others of alcoholics pay close attention to how they present and argue their suggestions to the significant others in terms of changing their communication towards the alcoholic.

Another question raised from Al-Anon’s notion of detachment is how it resonates with the male partners of alcoholics, since the male members constitute a clear minority in Al-Anon (Al-Anon, 2015a). Holmila (1997) states that the family role of the significant others of alcoholics presumably affects the coping strategies that the significant others engage in. In another study, Raitasalo and Holmila (2005) found that women were more likely to attempt to control the drinking of a male alcoholic rather than vice versa (see also Holmila, 1988). It could be speculated that the conventional role of a caregiver often assigned to the female partners of alcoholics might make the notion of detachment as a form of coping more relevant to women than men. Additionally, men and women are known to vary in their views about supportive communication in general (Burlinson, 2003; Hanasono et al., 2011). These issues need further research.

From a broader perspective, these findings shed light on the potential that supportive interactions have in enhancing individuals’ relationships, in addition to the relationship between the parties of the supportive interaction situation.

However, in the realm of supportive communication research, the focus has mainly been on the relational effects of support as it relates to the relationship between support providers and receivers (e.g., Burleson, 1990). The possibility to improve close relationships by engaging in supportive communication outside of the relationship is, therefore, of special interest. Consequently, I suggest that social support outcomes that manifest themselves as communication in relationships other than the relationship between the parties involved in the support situation ought to be incorporated in the scope of supportive communication research. Since the outcomes of social support on physical and psychological well-being have traditionally been the focus of psychological research (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), the outcomes on relationships could be more clearly addressed by supportive communication scholars. In addition to mutual-aid or therapy groups, people often engage in supportive conversations to deal with relationships or communication problems outside of the relationship in question. Apart from romantic relationships, researchers could also focus on how parent-child relationships or friendships are affected by supportive interactions in other contexts. More generally, by clearly determining the outcomes of supportive communication (e.g., relational or health outcomes), the mechanisms of supportive communication would become more clearly defined.

From a more theoretical viewpoint, the relational effects of supportive communication outside of the support giving situation are best understood as long-term effects of supportive communication. Similarly, I suggest that the reappraisals (as part of the helping mechanism of supportive communication) producing the long-term effects are to be understood as the short-term effects of supportive communication (for more about the division of short- and long-term outcomes, see Burleson, 1994; MacGeorge, 2009). This kind of conceptualisation helps clarify the differences between these processes and thus, aids in answering the question of what it is that produces the positive outcomes of supportive communication.

The relationship between the short- and long-term effects of supportive communication deserves even more attention. The fourth sub-study of this dissertation sheds some light on this issue by indicating that, from the members' perspectives, the short-term effects of Al-Anon's supportive communication (interpersonal learning, enhancement of self-esteem and increased knowledge) all produced some changes in the alcoholic-partner relationship owing to the partners' way of changing their own patterns of communication with the alcoholic. However, it remains unclear how the enhancement of self-esteem, for instance, in Al-Anon groups transforms into more functional communication with the alcoholic. For example, can such a transformation be achieved after one empowering Al-Anon meeting, or does it happen gradually? As MacGeorge



(2009) suggests, it might be the accumulation of helpful supportive processes that lead to positive outcomes. These issues also call for extended research.

### 6.3 Conclusions: Bringing the supportive communication perspective to mutual-aid group research

In the sections above, I have discussed the main conclusions of this dissertation. In this final sub-chapter, I want to encourage future researchers to continue applying the supportive communication perspective in studying mutual-aid group interactions.

As demonstrated in the literature review, mutual-aid group research lacks a unified theoretical base (Cline, 1999; So, 2009). This has resulted in several classifications of essentially similar group processes, thus making it difficult to compare the studies to one other. Ultimately, this absence of a shared theoretical framework generates a fragmented picture of mutual-aid groups and impedes the coherent understanding of group processes.

This dissertation shows that the theoretical underpinnings of supportive communication provide an analytic outlook towards the interactional processes of mutual-aid groups such that they can be studied independent of their effects and outcomes. For example, the theoretical constructs of short- and long-term effects of supportive communication expose the foundations of the helping mechanisms of mutual-aid groups, and thus, aid attempts to understand what it is that works in mutual-aid groups. In addition, supportive communication's perspective on the helpfulness of support is clearly appropriate also in the mutual-aid group context. However, in addition to encouraging mutual-aid group researchers to use the supportive communication theory to better understand the different elements of the group interactions, I emphasise the importance of understanding the holistic nature of the supportive communication process in mutual-aid groups. The model presented in chapter 5.5 is one possibility of understanding how the different elements of supportive communication relate to each other in the groups.

Twelve step mutual-aid groups also provide fruitful subjects for the general study of supportive communication. Nevertheless, among communication scholars, the 12-step face-to-face meeting mutual-aid groups such as Al-Anon represent a generally ignored area of research. As this dissertation shows, 12-step groups are truly unique social communities and thus, should be studied by communication scholars in their own rights. These groups provide an especially interesting subject for research when concentrating on the contextual elements of support—a subject that has recently received increasing attention in the field of supportive communication (e.g., Burlison, 2009). Understanding the meaning

of context for supportive interactions also has important practical implications when creating supportive environments.

Finally, during the years in which this dissertation has been written, social science researchers have begun talking about an emerging paradigm in research on alcoholism referred to as the “alcohol’s harm to others” perspective. Research in this paradigm approaches alcohol problems from the perspective of the harmful effects that problematic drinking has on other people (Mugavin, Livingston & Laslett, 2014; Warpenius & Tigerstedt, 2013). Importantly, these effects are seen as being essentially conveyed through interactions (Warpenius et al., 2013). This notion is important and could be supplemented with micro-level research on actual interactions through which others are affected by substance abuse. I believe that research on interpersonal communication could significantly contribute to our understanding of the interpersonal challenges of those affected by others’ substance abuse. Although in Al-Anon the partners of alcoholics constitute the majority of the members, studies are needed that specifically target the experiences of parents, children and friends of alcoholics. However, such research needs to be highly analytic, sensitive to particular subjects and rigorous enough to truly understand the significant others’ perspectives and their unique needs for support. In addition, I think it is pivotal that in addition to describing the problems of the significant others, the possibilities of recovering from those problems are also studied.

This dissertation has described the Al-Anon members’ pursuit of recovery and the role of communication in it. The results show how communication can both work as the source of making positive changes as well as the realm in which these changes are executed.

## 7 EVALUATION OF RESEARCH AND ETHICS

The philosophical assumptions of interpretivism/naturalism direct the evaluative criteria this dissertation aims to meet. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), qualitative researchers have three ways of using evaluative criteria in research. First is to adopt the classic criteria of good quality research by adopting positivist assumptions and quantitative frameworks. Second is to adopt alternative criteria often referred to as “trustworthiness” (see Lincol & Guga, 1985). Third is to abandon any universal criteria and instead evaluate studies on a case-by-case basis. I follow Tracy’s (2010, as cited in Manning & Kunkel, 2014) notion of having case-specific ways of determining the criteria, rather than not having any general criteria at all. Here, I aim to evaluate this dissertation according to the eight criteria proposed by Tracy (2010, as cited in Manning & Kunkel, 2014), acknowledging that there are several ways of meeting these criteria. I also explore other criteria proposed in the methodological literature as they are relevant to this dissertation.

Tracy’s (2010, as cited in Manning & Kunkel, 2014) first criterion is having a worthy topic. A feature of a good topic is its ability to view established phenomena from a new perspective. This dissertation seeks to draw theoretical attention to concepts often used in everyday conversations such as “co-dependency”. It also deals with a subject that has not been adequately studied from a communication research viewpoint.

The second criterion is rich rigor which refers to the depth of the study’s theoretical base, data collection methods and obtained data. Although research on the helping mechanisms of social support groups, which is mostly conducted in the social sciences, directed the approaches of the sub-studies, the theoretical background of this dissertation is primarily comprised of research on supportive communication. Even so, the theoretical background of supportive communication is vast and multidimensional. Thus, there exists several different models and approaches within the perspective of supportive communication utilised in diverse ways in the sub-studies.

The richness of data can also be seen from the viewpoint of triangulation (see Frey et al., 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Thus, if several different pieces of evidence confirm the same conclusion, the validity of the research is enhanced. This dissertation incorporated triangulation with the use of multiple methods:

observations, interviews and questionnaires. These data-gathering methods provide the perspectives of support receiver, support provider and third-party observer (see Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992). The three different ways of data gathering also enabled long-term involvement with the research participants, which is itself considered a validity-enhancing element of qualitative research (Frey et al., 2000; Manning & Kunkel, 2014). That is, contact with the Al-Anon members was established in 2011 and the data gathering continued until the end of 2013. The two alternative ways of implementing triangulation, through the use of multiple sources and researchers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), could also have contributed to the truth-value of the dissertation. With respect to possible improvements, especially the perspective of another researcher would have strengthened the results of this dissertation. In addition, although the male members of Al-Anon constitute a clear minority (Al-Anon, 2015a), including their perspectives in the interviews would have provided a more multi-voiced view of Al-Anon.

The third criterion discussed by Tracy (2010, as cited in Manning & Kunkel, 2014) is sincerity, referring to the openness and honesty of the researcher and adoption of procedures such as self-reflexivity and the provision of an honest account of the research process. Efforts to meet this criteria included maintaining an audit trail during the analyses (see Marshall & Rossman, 2011), writing a research journal and reflecting on the data gathered against my personal presuppositions about the phenomenon under investigation. Providing detailed descriptions of the methodological procedures when presenting research can also be seen as fulfilling the sincerity criterion. Although I aimed to provide detailed accounts of the methodical steps taken in the sub-studies, I acknowledge that presenting the studies in the form of journal articles inevitably results in rather a limited presentation of these procedures. Finally, research ethics can be also seen as part of the sincerity criteria (see also Marshall & Rossman, 2011), more thoroughly discussed later in this chapter.

The fourth criterion, credibility, determines how believable the study is. Being interpretive in nature, the credibility of this dissertation stems from evaluating how well the results reflect the study participants' views of the phenomenon under investigation. As previously noted, when discussing the richness of data, a clear limitation of this dissertation is the fact that I collected and analysed all of the research materials utilised in the sub-studies myself. The data used in the sub-studies would have greatly benefited from the added viewpoint of another researcher. Particularly in the sub-studies utilising interview and questionnaire data, it is important to remember that the interpretations ultimately represent the researcher's view of the phenomenon under investigation. However, it has been clearly stated in the articles presenting the sub-studies that the results should be treated as stemming from the researcher's particular viewpoint.

Manning and Kunkel (2014) state that credibility can also be enhanced through data excerpts displayed in the research results to support the claims made. This has been done in the results sections of the sub-studies in the form of direct quotations from the data. However, as the results of the sub-studies are presented within the strict page limits of academic journals, the number of quotations is limited. Furthermore, as the interviews were conducted in Finnish and later translated into English, there is a possibility that the exact meaning of the reported quotations may have been lost in translation.

To enhance the credibility of the interpretations, a procedure called member validation was utilised in the first sub-study. Member validation or member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) refers to a procedure where the researcher's interpretations are shared with the study participants for commenting. Member validation was also used to compensate for the fact that my presence presumably had some effect on the communication in the observed meetings, thus posing a threat on the credibility of the results. In practice, a draft of the results was provided to a few of the members of the observed groups. They confirmed the results by stating that the behaviours in Al-Anon meetings were truthfully described. However, they asked for some minor changes in the terms used in the results. In addition, after the observational period in the first sub-study, I asked a few of the group members in each observed groups whether they noticed a difference in the group's behaviour during the observations. They responded that, despite mild excitement in the beginning, the meetings proceeded as usual. Given the use of these procedures, the first sub-study can be seen as approaching the more classic criteria to evaluate research (see Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

A possible limitation of the method is also that the parts of the questionnaire used in this dissertation were placed after the structured questionnaire section inquiring the members' views of Al-Anon's supportive communication that was not used in this dissertation. It is possible that the respondents experienced fatigue after answering the structured part and thus, were sententious in the open-ended questions or that the general questions in the structured section attuned the respondents' answers to the open-ended questions (for more about question order effects, see Frey et al., 2000). However, as the structured questions asked about supportive communication in the meetings in general and were developed on the basis of my observations in the real Al-Anon meetings, it can be assumed that the possible tuning was not too restrictive.

The fact that the results of the sub-studies have been presented at several international conferences and have undergone a rigorous peer-review process before publication can also be seen as enhancing the studies' credibility. In other words, the sub-studies have already been subjected to the evaluation of the

scientific community in the process of executing the studies that has undoubtedly advanced the research process.

Tracy's (2010, as cited in Manning & Kunkel, 2014) next two criteria are resonance and significant contribution. Resonance means that research interests different people from multiple backgrounds. Obviously, I can only hope that I have met this criterion. However, I do believe that the topics addressed in the dissertation are issues that resonate with many people at some level. I also believe that this study offers new insights into these subjects. However, I acknowledge that the results present the perspectives of individuals who have benefited from Al-Anon, and as noted before, are presumably keen to talk positively about the groups. The voices of those who have not had positive experiences with Al-Anon could have strengthened the results of the sub-studies.

The seventh criterion is meaningful coherence, which means that the research does what it is set out to do and the methods selected to meet the aims are appropriate. The purpose of the study outlined in the introduction was to comprehensively examine supportive communication in Al-Anon, including the types, quality, mechanisms and outcomes of support. These four aspects of the general research topic have been addressed in detail in the sub-studies. In addition, as the aim was a comprehensive understanding of support in Al-Anon, the three data collection methods as well as the three perspectives of the support situation offer a multidimensional view of the phenomenon under investigation.

Tracy's (2010, as cited in Manning & Kunkel, 2014) eighth and final criterion is ethics. As noted by Manning and Kunkel (2014) and Marshall and Rossman (2011), ethical considerations are an important part of rigorous research and thus, an important criterion also for quality. In any research involving human beings, the people involved must be respected (Kuula, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This basic principle includes respecting the self-determination of the participants, not causing harm to them and protecting their privacy and anonymity (Kuula, 2006). In what follows, these three aspects of research ethics are elaborated upon more thoroughly in the context of this dissertation.

First, the self-determination of the participants was ensured with an honest and open approach, starting from the first contact with Al-Anon. This means that the study's objective was explained openly to the contact persons in Al-Anon. Al-Anon was considered a companion in the study, taking part in planning the data gatherings, helping to find the study participants, and organizing the distribution of the questionnaires. The purpose of the study was also repeatedly explained to the participants in the beginning of the interviews and observations and in the cover letter accompanying the questionnaire. However, a more detailed description about the study's purpose (theoretical tenets etc.) was not provided, as it would not have been purposeful (see Mäkelä, 2006).

The decision to respond to the questionnaire and participate in the interviews was made by each individual member. The decision to participate in the observations was made collectively by each group. The members explained that the groups' decision to participate was made using an Al-Anon method called "group conscience". This means that the decision was reached after a thoughtful discussion where all of the members were heard and the group felt that the decision made was truly approved of by the whole group (Al-Anon, 2009; see also Kauffman, 1994). Finally, I also asked the members for their permission to record the interviews and make notes in the observed meetings.

Second, not causing harm to the participants includes how participants are treated in the study process. Tracy (2010, as cited in Manning & Kunkel, 2014) calls this aspect of research ethics "relational ethics". As noted, in addition to the open approach, the participants were treated as equal companions in the research process rather than "study subjects". This involved building a rapport with the participants and ensuring that they felt safe in the interview and observation situations. Moreover, the observed meetings were not recorded as it could have aroused anxiety among the members and would also have contradicted the fundamental principle of anonymity in the meetings.

The third and final ethical consideration discussed by Kuula (2006), protecting the anonymity and privacy of the participants, was given special attention as anonymity is the cornerstone of 12-step groups (Al-Anon, 2009). The study participants were assured that all of the materials were handled confidentially and the results were only presented in a way that secured anonymity. I also wanted to respect Al-Anon's principle of anonymity by not inquiring about the occupations or other socioeconomic information about the members.

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# Appendix 1

## Questionnaire

Tampereen yliopisto  
Viestinnän, median ja teatterin yksikkö  
Puheviestintä

SAATE

Tervehdys Al-Anonin jäsen!

Olen tekemässä Tampereen yliopistossa puheviestinnän väitöskirjaa Al-Anon ryhmien vertaistuesta ja sen vaikutuksista. Tarkoituksena on saada kokonaisvaltaisesti tietoa Al-Anonin merkityksestä jäsenten toipumiselle. Tutkimuksen tulokset tuottavat tärkeää tietoa siitä, millaisen avun vertaistuki voi alkoholistien läheisille tarjota.

Oheinen kysely on lähetetty Al-Anonin keskuspalvelun kautta. Kaikki vastaukset käsitellään ehdottoman luottamuksellisina ja raportoidaan siten, ettei ketään yksittäistä vastaajaa voida tunnistaa tutkimuksessa. Vastauksia käytetään vain Tampereen yliopiston puheviestintä-oppiaineen tutkimuksessa. Tutkimuksen tulokset ovat tietysti myös Al-Anonin käytettävissä.

Kyselyyn vastaaminen vie vain hetken ja se antaa erittäin arvokasta tietoa. Täytä lomake ja palauta se samassa palautuskuoressa Al-Anon jäsenkyselyn kanssa. Kerron myös mielelläni lisää tutkimuksesta puhelimitse tai sähköpostilla.

Kiitos tuhannesti vastauksestasi!

Lämpimin terveisin,

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29. Mikä ryhmäläisten tuessa tuntuu tärkeimmältä oman jaksamisesi kannalta? Kerro omin sanoin. Voit jatkaa paperin toiselle puolelle tarvittaessa.

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30. Onko ryhmäläisten tuessa jokin tekijä, joka erityisesti auttaa tai on joskus auttanut pyrkimyksessäsi muuttaa omaa käyttäytymistäsi suhteessa alkoholiriippuvaiseen läheiseesi? Kerro omin sanoin. Voit jatkaa paperin toiselle puolelle tarvittaessa.

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Taustatiedot (ympyröi sopiva vaihtoehto):

31. Alkoholistiläheiseni, jonka vuoksi käyn ryhmässä on:
- a. puolisoni/avopuolisoni/tyttö- tai poikaystäväni
  - b. lapseni
  - c. muu sukulainen
  - d. ystäväni
  - e. muu
32. Kuulun ikäluokkaan:
- a. 30 tai alle
  - b. 31-40
  - c. 41-50
  - d. 51-60
  - e. yli 60
33. Olen käynyt ryhmässä:
- a. vähemmän kuin vuoden
  - b. 1-5 vuotta
  - c. 6-10 vuotta
  - d. yli 10 vuotta
34. Olen:
- a. nainen
  - b. mies

KIITOS VASTAUKSESTASI!

## Appendix 2

### Interview guide

Aloituskysymys:

Kuinka kauan olet käynyt ryhmässä?

OSA 1:

Teemat:

#### 1. Elämä ennen Al-Anonia

Kerro niistä tapahtumista, jotka toivat sinut Al-Anoniin.

- muiden tahojen tuki
- oma viestintä suhteessa alkoholistiin/viestintäsuhde (esimerkki, tyypillinen päivä)

#### 2. Al-Anoniin meneminen

Kerro elämästäsi Al-Anoniin menemisen jälkeen.

- ryhmän tuen rooli toipumisessa (esim. mieleen jäänyt palaveri)
- ajattelun/käyttäytymisen muutokset? (esimerkit: nyt vs. aikaisemmin)
- oma viestintä suhteessa alkoholistiin/viestintäsuhde (esimerkit: nyt vs. aikaisemmin)
- vaikeinta muutoksessa

#### 3. Elämä nyt

Kerro elämästäsi nyt.

- ryhmän tuen rooli elämässä nyt
- ajattelu/käyttäytyminen (esimerkki)
- oma viestintä suhteessa alkoholistiin/viestintäsuhde (esimerkki, tyypillinen päivä)

## OSA 2:

### Teemat:

#### 1. Ilmapiiri

- mitä sinulle merkitsee palaverien hyvä ilmapiiri?
- mistä se syntyy?

#### 2. Kumppanuus

- mitä sinulle merkitsevät ryhmä itsessään ja ryhmäläiset?

#### 3. Jakaminen

- mitä sinulle merkitsee se, että voit itse jakaa palavereissa?

#### 4. Muiden kokemukset

- mitä saat muiden jakamista tarinoista?

### Loppukysymys:

- jos voisit muuttaa jotakin palavereissa, mitä se olisi?
- mitä et ainakaan muuttaisi?

### LOPUKSI:

### Taustakysymykset:

- ikä
- kysyttävää tutkimuksesta



# ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS





# Communication of support in mutual-aid group meetings for alcoholics' friends and relatives

VENLA KUULUVAINEN & PEKKA ISOTALUS

## ABSTRACT

**AIMS** – This study examines the kinds of support that alcoholics' friends and relatives provide each other in Al-Anon mutual-aid groups. The study examines, first, the types of supportive communication in Al-Anon meetings and second, how contextual features affect supportive communication in these meetings. **DESIGN** – The research data were collected through non-participant observations of 11 group meetings and analysed by combined deductive and inductive approaches. **RESULTS** – Four types of support were detected: emotional, informational, esteem and social network, indicating that meetings serve as potential sources of comfort, learning, self-esteem enhancement and company. Contextual features, such as the 12-step ideology, had an effect on the content and form of supportive communication. **CONCLUSION** – The key to support in Al-Anon meetings lies in their discretion. That is, the way of communicating support and the contextual features of the meetings established favourable conditions for effective communication of support. The results of this study illustrate the actual communication processes exchanged by the people who have "been there", providing information useful to anyone in contact with friends or relatives of an alcoholic.

**KEYWORDS** – mutual-aid group, Al-Anon, supportive communication, alcoholism, significant others

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## Introduction

Alcohol dependency is a major public health issue in Finland. However, the people affected by living close to an alcoholic have been less studied. And yet, more than 40% of the Finnish population are estimated to be affected by the alcoholism of someone close to them (Huhtanen & Tigerstedt, 2008). Overlooking the negative effects that alcoholism has on others is also a social policy issue. That is, the costs of alco-

holism extend to the alcoholics' intimates, although such costs are rarely illustratable in monetary terms (Mäkelä, 2012). Indeed, the friends and relatives of alcoholics are known to suffer from decreased well-being (Roberts & Brent, 1982). The essence of the burdens on alcoholics' significant others is interpersonal in nature. That is, the relationships between alcoholics and their significant others are often skewed in the

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areas of controlling and nurturing (Cullen & Carr, 1999; Hogg & Frank, 1992; Le Poire, 2004). For outsiders, the problems of the people living close to alcoholics are not always easy to understand, and these significant others often live in isolation, without the social support they need (Orford, Velleman, Copello, Templeton, & Ibang, 2010; Wiseman 1991). There seems to be something specific about living close to an alcoholic that requires a certain kind of supportive approach. Furthermore, the help from social welfare agencies and professionals is often exiguous (Orford et al., 2010) or prioritises the treating of the alcoholic (Barber & Gilbertson, 1997).

One of the few places where friends and relatives of alcoholics can receive support is mutual-aid groups. Al-Anon is a mutual-aid group similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, but it is directed toward the significant others of alcoholics. There are 140 Al-Anon groups, entirely run by their members, in 100 localities in Finland (Al-Anon, 2012). Previous research has shown that mutual-aid groups have many positive effects on the well-being of their members (for review, see Cline, 1999). The oral tradition in the 12-step groups has been considered the means by which group members move from the identity of a sufferer to that of a survivor (Denzin, 1987). However, the actual communication processes that create these effects are not well-defined (cf. Schiff & Bargal, 2000). Indeed, communication scholars have not sufficiently addressed mutual-aid groups in spite of their great pragmatic potential for identifying the specific communication processes in the groups (cf. Cline, 1999). Furthermore, ways of supporting the significant others of alcoholics have

been understudied in general. In the current study, we examined supportive processes in Al-Anon mutual-aid groups from the standpoint of supportive communication. This yielded first-hand knowledge of the actual communication processes that people who have experienced life with an alcoholic use to help each other.

### **Communication contributing to mutual-aid group outcomes**

Al-Anon has been addressed in previous studies, along with other mutual-aid groups (e.g. Borkman, 1999; Humphreys, 2004; Mäkelä et al., 1996), but only a few studies have focused specifically on outcomes in Al-Anon. Al-Anon have been claimed to reduce group members' depressive symptoms (Rychtarik & McGillicuddy, 2005) and enhance their coping skills (Gorman & Rooney, 1979). The communication within mutual-aid groups has been investigated mostly in the fields of social sciences (e.g. Arntson & Droge, 1987; Cawayer & Smith-Dupre, 1995; Kurtz, 1994; Levy, 1979; Peterson, 2009), where most of the studies have been inductive case studies (cf. Cline, 1999). More specifically, the group meetings have been examined as speech events (Denzin, 1987; Mäkelä et al., 1996) and from a conversation analysis perspective (Arminen 1998; 2001; 2004). In their reviews, Schiff and Bargal (2000) and Lieberman (1976) have shown that the most important communication processes in mutual-aid meetings entail "installing hope"; "universality and an alternative to loneliness"; "support"; "teaching and learning coping methods"; "communicating experimental knowledge"; "self-disclosure"; "receiving feedback"; and "expressing and experiencing intense emo-

tions". However, the problem with these classifications is that not only are they communication processes, but they also describe outcomes and working mechanisms of the groups (cf. So, 2009). For the practical value of research, it would be beneficial to define clearly the actual communicative processes in the groups. Furthermore, the lack of a shared theoretical background (cf. Cline, 1999) makes the comparison of these studies difficult.

In this study, we examine the interaction within mutual-aid groups as derived from the research tradition of communication studies. From this point of view, the supportive processes in Al-Anon meetings are seen as a form of communication. That is, communication is the mechanism through which support is conveyed in the meetings (see Burlleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, & Sarason, 1994). More specifically, this study rests on the extensive theoretical background established on *supportive communication*, which is defined by Burlleson and MacGeorge (2002, p. 374) as "verbal and nonverbal communication produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid". From the perspective of supportive communication, the investigation of support means studying the messages through which people engage in supportive processes, the interactions in which supportive messages are exchanged and the relationships that are both established by and contextualise supportive communication (Burlleson et al., 1994, p. xviii).

Supportive communication has been shown to have several positive effects on well-being (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003; Callaghan & Morrissey, 1993; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Suggested mechanisms for

these effects include increases in the perceived control of members over their personal environments and reduction of uncertainty (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). Outcomes of supportive communication are influenced by the content of that supportive communication, personal features of the support-giver and recipient, features of the relationship between the two and contextual factors (Burlleson, 2009). This study concentrates on content characteristics and contextual features of supportive communication.

Different types of supportive messages have been labelled according to their topical content (Burlleson & Goldsmith, 1998). The different types of supportive communication have been shown to differ in effectiveness based on the type of problem addressed (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992) and different phases of crisis (Jacobson, 1986). An extensive body of previous research has generally differentiated five types of support (for review, see Cutrona & Russell, 1990). In the current study, we use four types of supportive communication, chosen for their relevance as defined by previous research on mutual-aid groups (Lieberman, 1976; Schiff & Bargal, 2000). The four types are: (1) emotional support, which is provided to others "with the intent of helping another cope effectively with emotional distress" (Burlleson, 2003a, p. 553); (2) informational support, which "involves providing necessary information" (Wills, 1985, p. 62); (3) esteem support, which is "provided to others with the intent of enhancing how they feel about themselves and their attributes, abilities and accomplishments" (Holmstrom & Burlleson, 2011, p. 326); and (4) social network

support, which “entails a sense of belonging among people with similar interests and concerns” (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992, p. 155). The fifth type, instrumental support, which refers to tangible aid, such as lending money for the support of the recipient, is excluded from the current study due to its presumed irrelevance in group settings.

The communication perspective has previously been applied primarily to mutual-aid groups on the internet (Dennis, Kunkel, & Keyton, 2008). Many of these studies have used a coding scheme for the types of support, developed by Cutrona, Suhr and their associates (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). In these studies, informational support has often been reported as the most frequently occurring support type (e.g. Alexander, Peterson, & Hollingshead, 2003; Constantinos & Liu, 2009). However, computer-mediated communication differs in many aspects from face-to-face communication. It appears that the types of supportive communication in face-to-face meeting mutual-aid groups have not been previously examined.

Additionally, the non-verbal aspects of supportive communication within face-to-face meeting groups have received little attention, even if communication is composed of both verbal and non-verbal messages which can be seen as complementing or contradicting each other. Non-verbal communication is especially powerful because it is generally perceived as more genuine than verbal communication and so is more trusted (Guerrero & Hoobler, 2002). Non-verbal messages are particularly important when communicating emotions (Andersen & Guerrero, 2008). Accordingly, Jones and Wirtz (2007) have

claimed that non-verbal supportive communication could be even more important than verbal supportive communication. In this study, non-verbal communication is understood as “all the messages other than words that people exchange in interactive contexts” (Guerrero, Hecht, & DeVito, 2008, p. 5). More specifically, non-verbal supportive messages include eye contact, attentiveness, crying, vocalics, proxemics, pats, hugs, facial expressions, gesturing and head nods (Bullis & Horn, 1995; Dolin & Booth-Butterfield, 1993). In particular, the messages of *active listening* as support are emphasised (Bodie & Jones, 2012). Furthermore, according to Miczo and Burgoon (2008), two modes of non-verbal supportive communication – involvement and pleasantness – are especially important. Involvement and pleasantness are part of a broader concept, non-verbal immediacy, which is extremely important because it shows caring to the support recipient (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Moreover, non-verbal communication has been shown to be important in the creation of a safe atmosphere for the supportive processes (Jones & Wirtz, 2007).

Surrounding physical, cultural and normative contexts affect the processes of supportive communication (Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Burleson, 2003b). The 12-step mutual-aid groups create an interesting context for supportive communication, as the group meetings are highly structured. They start with the chairperson reading excerpts from Al-Anon literature. Next, each group member is allowed to speak, taking turns. Others are expected to listen, and spontaneous commenting on others’ stories is not allowed. The chairperson then usually reads from the

literature again as closing words. In the end all say a prayer together (for a more detailed description, see Ablon, 1974). Moreover, Al-Anon groups follow a 12-step programme, which promotes the ideology that life events are determined by a force (“Higher Power”) outside oneself (Cline, 1999). Although often referred to as “God”, what this force means to an individual member is one’s own decision. Thus, a freedom of worldview prevails in the groups (Al-Anon, 2013a). In spite of the concept of a power greater than oneself, the ideology also promotes the notion of answering for one’s own well-being. Indeed, the ideology features a contradiction between the conception of alcoholism as an uncontrollable disease that inevitably also sickens the alcoholic’s significant others, and the notion that one is responsible for improving one’s own actions (Anze, 1979). According to Denzin (1987), group members are expected to echo the 12-step ideology in their talk and to follow a particular form in their stories. According to Saulnier (1994, p. 254), the foundations of the Al-Anon meetings are constructed by the following elements: “the way life was experienced prior to coming to Al-Anon”; “the occurrences in Al-Anon that seemed to affect life and the member’s perception of it”; and “the resulting perceptual and behavioral changes”.

Moreover, in 12-step meetings, members communicate through story-like monologues, discussing their own experiences (Arntson & Droge, 1987; Arminen, 2004). According to Arminen (2004), the communication of support in 12-step meetings unfolds in the form of “second stories”, which are meant to give a new perspective, express understanding and gratitude

and offer information to support recipients (Arminen, 2001). Few studies focus specifically on the communication in Al-Anon meetings. Ablon (1974) describes the communication within Al-Anon as “education by alternatives”. According to her research, the exchange of information and emotional support through social community are important forms of support present in the meetings. Ablon (1974) argues that members often use black humour in their monologues, although the matters discussed are serious. In addition, she states that Al-Anon offers a safe arena for sharing intimate experiences.

## Research agenda

Previous research on face-to-face mutual-aid groups has not sufficiently distinguished the actual communication processes from their helping mechanisms and outcomes. In this study, we explore communication in Al-Anon groups from the perspective of supportive communication. Specifically, the data gathering and analysis are directed by the four types of support noted earlier: emotional, informational, social network and esteem support. Nevertheless, openness is maintained to new support types that might appear. The first goal is to deductively evaluate:

RQ1. What types of supportive verbal and non-verbal communication can be found in Al-Anon meetings?

As supportive communication in face-to-face meeting mutual-aid groups has not been extensively studied, our study detects the qualitative content of support types without the restriction of a detailed coding scheme. However, the qualitative content of the support types includes communicative acts and events (Saville-

Troike, 2003) that fit the theoretical descriptions of the support types described earlier. Thus, the theoretical background also works as a baseline for the second goal of the study, which is to determine:

RQ2. What communicative acts and events compose the different types of supportive communication in Al-Anon meetings?

The 12-step meetings include contextual features that make them interesting arenas for supportive processes. However, previous research on face-to-face meeting mutual-aid groups has not sufficiently considered the relationship between contextual factors and supportive processes. For this reason, the third goal of our study is to consider inductively:

RQ3. How do contextual features influence the supportive communication in Al-Anon meetings?

## Method

The data in the current study were gathered through real-time observation of Al-Anon meetings in winter 2011. A request to participate in the study was sent to all Al-Anon groups in Finland through the Al-Anon central service. Three groups were selected from among the volunteers, and the purpose of the study was explained in greater detail to them. Each Al-Anon group is independent, and the decision to participate in the study was made within each individual group. Eleven meetings were observed, each lasting 1.5–2.5 hours and including 8–12 members. Because the groups are open to anyone suffering from a significant other's alcoholism and do not have fixed memberships, the characteristics of group members cannot be described in detail. Also, the acquiring of informa-

tion from the observed meetings' attendees could be considered unethical as the groups function based on anonymity. The basic characteristics of the observed meetings' attendees appeared to be generally in accordance with the statistics of the Al-Anon membership survey (Al-Anon, 2013b). The majority of members attending the observed meetings were women; only two men were noted in the observed meetings.

Before the actual data gathering, the researcher trained on the note-taking technique in an open (to all interested) Al-Anon meeting. The first author then attended the meetings as an "observer-participant" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), sitting at the same table with the group. That is, the observer did not participate in the meetings' trajectory but remained as a silent onlooker. As noted above, mutual-aid groups build on anonymity and trust, and so the use of a recording device was not appropriate in this context. The observer was, however, allowed to take notes. Consequently, data were collected by taking free-form field notes focusing on supportive processes in the meetings. The four types of support noted earlier directed data gathering, but openness was maintained to any new support types that might appear. Additionally, general notes describing the situation were taken during the observations. A research journal was also maintained during the observation period. At the end of the last meeting with each group, the researcher met with one or more of the group members to discuss whether they had noticed a change in the group's behaviour during the observations. Members reported that despite a mild excitement at the beginning of the observa-

tion period, members had acted as usual.

Final research material included 80 pages (Times New Roman, 12-point, single-spaced) of typed field notes and research journal notes. The notes were analysed using thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). First, the material was coded deductively into categories representing the four types of support identified previously. Choices among the categories available were made according to the message's topical focus. As in the data-gathering process, openness was maintained throughout the analysis to new support types that might appear. However, no categories appeared that would not fit into the four support types. Next, the contents of support type categories were evaluated inductively. Content themes were created by placing different messages (e.g., describing one's way of coping with anxiety) under an umbrella term representing a more generic communicative event (e.g., suggestions). Last, contextual features affecting supportive communication were defined inductively. Because contextual features operate on a more implicit level than the actual supportive messages, the more general notes in the research journal were especially useful during the contextual feature analysis.

Because only one researcher observed the meetings, a draft of analysis results was provided to a few group members for validation of the content (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Other than suggesting a few changes in words and terms used, these members confirmed the results. According to one group member, the results illustrated "all the elements present in the groups and the way things are being discussed...the groups atmosphere is truthfully described".

## Results

### *Emotional support*

#### Non-verbal emotional support

In the meetings, the dialogue manifested in story-like monologues which were not directly verbally commented upon. Consequently, this rule-governed style of communication reduced the possibility for spontaneous verbal support for the person sharing at the moment. Hence, the non-verbal expressions of listening, empathy, understanding, agreement and other reactions while another member was talking played an important role in the meetings. Intensive silence, leaning forward, head nods and shakes, sighing and laughing were non-verbal substitutes for spontaneous verbal support.

#### Humour

Irony and sarcasm were frequently used by the members in relating their stories. Humour was often used at the end of a serious story as a way to lighten the intense atmosphere. The humorous way of discussing difficult subjects made it possible for members to approach their life experiences from a new, lighter perspective. One member commented on the "spiritual awakening" that is part of the 12-step ideology as follows: "Spiritual awakening is about treating everyone with respect except your own husband".

#### Hope and encouragement

Members often expressed hope at the end of a story by telling a positive detail about their everyday life. Hope was also expressed through members' descriptions of their steps forward in recovery after sharing of setbacks. It was often reiterated that setbacks were part of the recovery

process and should not be worried about. The possibility for learning things, finding strength and serenity, freeing oneself from fears and generally experiencing a positive change was frequently expressed. Members often described the enhancement of their lives after coming to Al-Anon as a “reward” that could be attained with the help of the group. These descriptions provided examples through which members could evaluate their progression along the path of recovery.

#### Understanding

As they shared their stories, members typically expressed understanding and empathy for the experiences of others and for the difficulties encountered in changing unhealthy patterns of behaviour. Members often described difficulties they had experienced before joining Al-Anon as a way of showing understanding for those now encountering similar problems. The difficulty of giving up control, trusting their Higher Power, learning new ways of behaving and being humble were described. One member, for example, remarked after sharing her successful process of recovery that she had recently lost her temper and yelled at her husband. Such admissions communicate to others that everyone makes mistakes and remind members that recovery is a never-ending process. In some of the meetings, it seemed to be an unspoken rule that members admit their weaknesses. In one meeting, almost every member admitted having used “manipulation and lying”, while in another meeting members confessed to “impatience” and “arrogance”. Members also articulated reasons for the difficulty of their recoveries.

Members often linked their stories to

those previously shared by other members by expressing the similarity of their experiences with those described by the previous speaker. It was common for members to make statements such as “I had a similar problem to Anna’s” or “All your experiences sound familiar”. The speaker’s experiences were also linked to the previous stories by using adverbs such as “I have *also* experienced...”, “*Neither* have I learned...”.

#### Confidentiality

Confidentiality and member anonymity were primarily expressed in the announcements read at the end of every meeting. Furthermore, when a new member joined the group, welcoming words were read from the organisation’s literature which emphasised the group’s confidentiality. In each meeting, a cardboard sign was prominently displayed reminding members to keep anything heard in the group confidential. Confidentiality was also maintained by not communicating members’ names, occupations or any other personal information.

#### *Informational support*

##### Suggestions

The stories shared in the meetings often included practical advice about how to achieve enhanced well-being. Members advised each other about how to avoid unhealthy ways of thinking and communicating in difficult situations. Solutions included going for a walk, praying, cleaning the house and talking to a friend. Continued participation in the group was often suggested as the answer to problems. In addition to practical advice, members shared more abstract suggestions about the



best ways of dealing with difficulties. They were advised to be kind to themselves, to give up the need to be right, to love themselves, to be humble, to live one day at a time and to laugh at things. Advice offered in the meetings was also often related to the spiritual element of the Al-Anon programme. For example, one suggested solution involved writing a letter to God, and in another case the Higher Power was compared to the support of the group. These kinds of expressions made the abstract concept of spirituality more comprehensible. Advice about how to interact with the alcoholic was also common. It was suggested that members stop nurturing and nagging and communicate things clearly, firmly and with a neutral tone of voice to the alcoholic.

#### Teachings

General facts of life were also shared in the member discussion. These facts were expressed in a declarative manner and often functioned as arguments in support of advice, relating the speaker's views about the meanings of things. Members often spoke in terms of what *it's about*: about giving up, being a martyr and constant beginning. Members shared their insights such as "being thin-skinned is actually vanity" or "obsequiousness doesn't equal being humble", and more abstract philosophies of life that often echoed the Al-Anon literature, such as "life is to learn" and "giving is receiving".

Many of the shared teachings related facts about alcoholism. The most frequently shared view was that alcoholism is a disease. The problems of those close to alcoholics were also often compared with the disease of alcoholism. Members talked

about symptoms, healing and nurturing. One member described the disease of alcoholics' significant others as follows: "I had an obsession to rescue as an alcoholic has an obsession to drink". Teachings also included reasons for the behaviour of alcoholics, suggesting that they were unable to bear critique or give support, were like little children and prone to manipulation.

#### Allegories

Members would use allegories to describe the situations shared in their stories. The function of these metaphors was to make the shared experiences more comprehensible, as in the following: "life with an alcoholic is like a card game...it is also keeping the lowest card to oneself". The comparisons were often more like figures of speech, comparing the process of recovery, for example, to a flower slowly opening its petals or likening Al-Anon to a medicine.

#### *Esteem support*

##### Relief of guilt

One of the most foundational thoughts of these groups seemed to be that others were not responsible for the alcoholic's drinking. The often repeated phrase "alcoholism is a disease" functioned as curtailing feelings of guilt and shame. Members' life choices, behaviours and thoughts were typically explained by childhood experiences and events of the past. One member described the effect of the past on present behaviour as follows: "once, I too was an innocent baby who was put into an alcoholic environment and had to learn how to cope with that".

Although a philosophy of humility was dominant, members also pointed out the alcoholic's responsibility for their own

circumstances. One member pondered her husband's behaviour as follows: "The fact that he just lies around without taking any kind of initiative. Before, I thought that it was just slackness but it's actually an act of power as well!" Although the alcoholic's behaviour was generally viewed as a symptom of their alcoholism, the speaker here placed the alcoholic in the more responsible role. Her own actions were suggested to be excusable after everything that the alcoholic had done. Furthermore, members sometimes justified the choice not to leave the alcoholic spouse with remarks about the beautiful person buried underneath the alcoholism.

#### Compliments and gratitude

At the beginning and/or the end of their stories, members typically thanked others for the stories they had shared, for their support, for listening and expressed thanks for their own recovery. Compliments often included praise for being brave and for the positive changes visible from an outsider's perspective. Members were advised to acknowledge their own value, to understand their right to be happy, to take care of themselves and to enjoy life. Al-Anon was represented as a group that exemplifies hope and recovery.

#### *Network support*

##### Group's significance

Although many indirect positive effects were attributed to the group, its intrinsic value in the process of recovery was also expressed. The group was described as a place for members to develop their own character, to take care of themselves and to participate in aid of their own well-being. Moreover, the group was often presented

as an alternative to being alone and as a source for the right kinds of support, because only those who had experienced similar situations could understand the member's circumstances. This point was especially emphasised to newcomers, who were given a letter in which all of the willing group members had shared their telephone numbers so that the newcomer could call them for support at any time. The often heard phrase was: "You don't have to be alone anymore!"

#### *Contextual factors affecting supportive communication in Al-Anon meetings*

##### The atmosphere of the meetings

The groups met in private and peaceful locations, sitting around a table in dim lighting and sometimes with candles on the table. Coffee and tea were available, and a small snack was often offered. The physical surroundings of the meetings created a peaceful arena for discussing difficult matters and communicating support. The "warm" atmosphere in the meetings also resulted from the group members' light chit-chat, pouring coffee and sharing snacks before and after the official meetings.

The atmosphere during the meetings ranged from very intense to cheerful according to the matters under discussion. When a speaker was sharing difficult experiences, other members expressed listening through intensive silence, leaning forward, nodding and compassionate sighs. Conversely, when a speaker shared experiences in a humorous manner, others would react with laughter, lightening the atmosphere. Non-verbal communication thus played a prominent role in creating the atmosphere of the meetings.

The general tone of the different meetings also varied according to the natures of the members' life situations. When there were members present experiencing an acute crisis and these matters were discussed, the atmosphere became quite heavy. Alternately, when members more advanced in their process of recovery described their progress, the atmosphere of the meeting became lighter. The atmosphere of the meetings created a receptive space for communicating social support.

The manner of interaction in the meetings

At the beginning of each meeting, the group leader read one of the steps and shared excerpts from the Al-Anon literature. Then, each member was in turn allowed to speak for a designated period of time with the help of a timer. After each member had shared their story, the group leader brought the meeting to a close by again reading from the Al-Anon literature. At the end of the meeting, the members recited the serenity prayer together. This ritualistic form of communication significantly affected the format of supportive communication.

Because spontaneous, conversational commenting during the stories of other members was not allowed, the role of non-verbal supportive reacting, such as expressions of understanding, was amplified. Verbal supportive communication manifested indirectly in the shared personal experiences of the members. For example, instead of saying "your life will change with the help of the group", members would say "my life changed with the help of the group". The support was often also formed as general statements about life as "nobody's perfect". The shared advice

was also indirect. Instead of saying "you should take care of your health", members would say "it is important to take care of one's health". Referring to the previous stories was also used to express understanding to another member.

The manner of interaction in the meetings also promoted the simultaneous giving and receiving of support. For example, when talking about past mistakes, members could simultaneously express understanding to previous speakers and seek support for themselves. Furthermore, while a member was sharing, others expressed non-verbal support to the speaker.

The 12-step ideology

The Al-Anon ideology was especially evident in the content of supportive communication during the meetings. The notion that the close one's alcoholism was in the hands of a Higher Power was expressed in the stories as a lack of resentment towards the surrounding situation. On the other hand, the problem at hand was viewed as a result of the member's own ways of thinking and behaving, with only the individual being able to make the change. The group's importance in the path of recovery was underlined, because the view of alcoholism as a lifelong disease suggested an ongoing recovery process.

The literature shared at the beginning of each group meeting also guided the content of the supportive communication. In one of the meetings, the fourth step ("Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves") was the topic for discussion and generated a great number of practical tips about how to perform the moral inventory. In another meeting where the sixth step ("Were entirely ready to have

God remove all these defects of character”) was being discussed, almost every member shared their defects of character.

The Al-Anon philosophy also affected the form of the stories shared in the meetings, which seemed to be constructed from certain recurrent elements that, in turn, affected the manifestation of the observed types of supportive messages. The recurrent elements in the stories included: (1) expressions of understanding, which typically conveyed that regardless of the progress made toward recovery, the road was rocky for everyone; (2) giving hope, often through reminders that hope existed despite the difficulty of matters under discussion; (3) giving relevant information to enhance recovery; (4) relief of guilt; and (5) emphasis of the group’s support during the recovery process. These elements might appear several times and in any order in member stories, although they frequently began with an expression of understanding. Expressions of understanding and messages of hope were present in almost every story, which represents the “big story” of Al-Anon as, above all, a story of hope and understanding.

## Discussion

In the current study, deductive and inductive approaches were combined to identify and describe the types of supportive communication that occur in Al-Anon meetings and to determine the influence of the surrounding context on supportive processes. Each of the four theoretical types of support was detected, suggesting that the meetings offer something for everyone. According to Jacobson (1986), different kinds of support may be beneficial to people experiencing different phases

of crisis. The four types of support typically appeared in the members’ stories in a definite order that reflected the 12-step ideology. Particularly, almost every story included the expression of understanding by relating common experiences and the sharing of hope by conveying the possibility of change. This result echoes the suggestion of Saulnier (1994) that the stories shared in Al-Anon meetings are constructed from the following components: what it was like, what happened and what it is like now. Our study extends Saulnier’s (1994) idea a step further by describing the *function* of these elements of members’ stories from the perspective of supportive communication. From this view, the action of sharing experiences is the action of conveying supportive messages to others (cf. Arminen, 2004: “second stories”; Ablon, 1974: “education by alternatives”). Moreover, the results mirror the typologies assorted in previous literature on mutual-aid group communication (see Lieberman, 1976; Schiff & Bargal, 2000), but position the specific messages under the umbrella terms for the types of supportive communication. Thus, the deductive approach to supportive processes, in addition to the inductive approach, makes it possible to interpret the implications of these findings in terms of previous knowledge about supportive communication.

Although quantities of the different support types were not measured during the observations or analysis, emotional support was distinctly the most endemic type. This is not surprising, as according to the 12-step ideology, the alcoholism of a significant other is not viewed as a problem to be solved, but it is rather the members’ own well-being that is the chal-

lenge. Emotional support has been shown to be the most beneficial type of support in all kinds of situations (Burlleson, 2003a). Further, emotion-focused support is considered especially effective in situations where the support recipient does not feel in control of the situation (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Also the informational support offered in the meetings was often *emotion-focused* (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000). The information was not intended to solve a specific problem, but to help members find constructive ways of viewing a given situation. The goal of emotion-focused support has been identified as encouraging the recipient to adopt a more positive situational appraisal (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Burlleson, 2003a). The abundant use of humour in stories can also be viewed as a means of altering members' attitudes toward the issues under discussion. Humour as a stylistic feature also allows members to provide and receive support in a polite and face-saving manner (Goldsmith, 1994).

In previous research on communication in mutual-aid groups, non-verbal communication has rarely been considered. However, the results show that non-verbal communication is an important channel through which emotional support is communicated. That is, as each member's time to talk was limited, the majority of meeting members listened to others. In fact, the art of listening is also emphasised by the 12-step groups themselves (Denzin, 1987). As others were sharing, non-verbal communication was used to express attentiveness to the speaker, as commenting on others' stories was not allowed. These observations can be understood as non-verbal immediacy, which is known to be an impor-

tant factor in effectively communicating support (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). In fact, supportive listeners are often considered parallel to supportive people (Bodie, Vickery, & Gearhart, 2013). Our findings show that when studies focus only on the verbal communication of mutual-aid groups, an important part of the meetings' interaction is overlooked. These results also highlight the contextual differences between face-to-face and internet mutual-aid groups. Research on internet mutual-aid groups has often found informational support to be the type most frequently expressed in meetings (Constantinos & Liu, 2009).

As noted previously, most of the informational support concentrated on encouraging members to adopt more positive situational appraisals. Informational support is known to be accompanied by a certain element of risk, because many factors in the process of giving information can potentially result in rejection of the advice or even in the support recipient being offended (MacGeorge, Feng, & Thompson, 2008). Based on a definition established in previous research, we found that the observed meetings included informational support that could be considered "good" (see MacGeorge et al., 2008). First, the advice given in the meetings was feasible. Informational support in meetings with the objective of problem solving primarily included suggestions about how an individual should behave in a given situation. According to MacGeorge, Feng, Butler and Budarz (2004), only advice about something within the control of the support recipient is considered helpful. Second, advice was given in the meetings using a polite approach. Advice was often presented as personal experience about

successful methods of coping. The politeness and face-saving quality of informational support have been correlated with the support's effectiveness (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge, Lichtman, & Pressey, 2002). Third, the informational support was well-situated. The advice given in the meetings was always accompanied by emotional support, which according to Feng (2009) results in increased effectiveness.

In sum, the contradictory nature of the 12-step ideology (Anze, 1979) was apparent in the shared experiences, also from the supportive communication's point of view. On the one hand, the message was about surrendering, relieving guilt and trusting the Higher Power. On the other hand, members were encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions.

Based on the results of the current study and previous research on supportive communication, several explanations can be made for the popularity of Al-Anon mutual-aid groups as a source of social support. First, the endemic role of emotional support and the face-saving quality of the advice make the supportive communication in these meetings very sophisticated. Sophisticated supportive communication is person-centred and acknowledges the recipient's feelings and thoughts (Burlison, 1994). The sophistication of supportive communication is one of the most important factors determining its effectiveness (Burlison, 2008; Rack, Burlison, Bodie, Holmstrom, & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Second, emotionally supportive and non-verbal communication together with the physical environment of the meetings creates a space conducive to communicating support. According to Burlison and Gold-

smith (1998), the right conditions for supportive processes are created through mutual trust between the support giver and recipient, the sense of safeness to discuss difficult matters, the ability to discuss the subject logically and the feeling of comfort in the situation. To summarise, based on the results of this study with respect to the theoretical foundations of supportive communication, we conclude that the key to support in Al-Anon meetings lies in their *discretion*. That is, the way of sharing one's own experiences and the rule-governed trajectory of the meetings established favourable conditions for effective communication of support. Hence, good-quality support can be seen as inbuilt in the practice and ideology of the groups.

Some features of the meetings' supportive processes still need to be examined more closely. First, the intentional focus and topical focus of verbal support can sometimes be incongruous. For instance, the topical focus of the phrase "alcoholism is a disease" is informational; however, the phrase can also be used as a means of relieving guilt. In future research, it would be beneficial to determine the perspectives of support givers and recipients as compared to those of the observer. Second, as the key verbal activity in the meetings was the sharing of experiences, the distinction between giving support to others and venting one's own emotions, which also predisposes oneself to receiving support, was often impossible to make. Cawyer and Smith-Dupre (1995) reported a similar finding from their observations of AIDS/HIV support groups. According to them, the idea of "shared emotion" better describes the supportive process in the meetings than a strict "give

and take” view of supportive communication. According to the “helper-therapy principle” (Riessman, 1965), the support giver benefits in several ways while supporting others. The third factor of interest was that very few men were present in the observed meetings. Women are known to prefer emotion-focused support (Burlison, 2003b) and to use non-verbal supportive communication more frequently than men (Bullis & Horn, 1995; Jones & Wirtz, 2007). Future research would benefit from comparing the supportive communication of groups such as AA, in which members are primarily men (Alcoholic Anonymous, 2008), to the supportive communication observed in Al-Anon. Indeed, Al-Anon groups have previously been labelled as stress-coping groups, whereas AA groups have been labelled as behavioural control groups (Levy, 1979). This kind of comparison would also shed light on possible gender-related differences in the ways of moving, through communication, from the identity of a sufferer to the identity of a survivor (cf. Denzin, 1987). In sum, the design of forms of support to those who are living under the burden of alcohol-related problems could benefit greatly from the application of research observations in the field of supportive communication.

The current study has several limitations. First, only one observer conducted observations, and without the use of a technical data-recording device. However, it is generally difficult for outsiders to gain any kind of access to mutual-aid groups because of their pursuit of anonymity and exclusion of professionals (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). Nevertheless, mutual-aid groups should be investigated,

with appreciation to their commitment to privacy and non-alignment. To counter this limitation, results were evaluated by Al-Anon members to validate their general accuracy (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985), which increases their credibility. Third-party observation can also be justified as a means to gain data that describes actual communication in contrast to self-reports. Second, it is possible that the presence of the observer affected the behaviour of group members during the observed meetings (Flick, 2007). However, all the groups were observed three to four times, which allowed members to adjust to the presence of the observer. Also, when members were asked about any possible effect, they reported only a mild excitement at the outset of observations. The observation of more than one group also makes the results more generalisable. To conclude, given the problematic role of reliability and validity in naturalistic research (e.g. Lincoln & Cuba, 1985), efforts were made to compensate for this limitation. However, this study is the authors’ interpretation of the supportive processes in the observed meetings and cannot reflect the Al-Anon meetings in their entirety.

The popularity of Al-Anon groups indicates the need for feasible support among those close to alcoholics. However, because the problems that alcoholism causes to the alcoholic’s significant others often are complex, the people trying to help them may feel incapable of providing adequate support. The results of the current study illustrate the kinds of support exchanged by people who have “been there”, providing information useful to anyone in contact with friends or relatives of an alcoholic. To conclude, although the

significant other's recovery may bolster the alcoholic's sobriety (Le Poire, 2004), the primary responsibility of those close to alcoholics is caring for themselves – a task that cannot be accomplished without the support of others.

**Declaration of interest** None.

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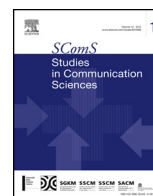
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# Supporting others – Supporting oneself: Members' evaluations of supportive communication in Al-Anon mutual-aid groups



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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

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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

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 practise, 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.

**Table 1**  
Questionnaire respondents' ages, relationship to the alcoholic (one or several) and years in Al-Anon in numbers and percentages.

Relationship to the alcoholic	Partner 138 (82%)	Child 23 (14%)	Friend 37 (22%)	Other relative 4 (2%)	Other 7 (4%)
Age group	Under 30 4 (2%)	31–40 22 (13%)	41–50 29 (17%)	51–60 38 (23%)	Over 60 76 (45%)
Years in Al-Anon	Less than a year 16 (9%)	1–5 years 47 (28%)	6–10 years 32 (19%)	Over 10 years 75 (44%)	

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 chit-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 own 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 Burlison 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 unfeasible advice (see Feng, 2009; Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Budar, 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 is insoluble (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Likewise, according to Burlison 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 endemic support type (e.g., Alexander, Peterson & Holligshead, 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 Burlison’s & MacGeorge’s (2002) notion of sophisticated or person-centred messages. However, the person-centredness 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 (Burlleson, 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, Burlleson, & Jones, 2012; Burlleson, 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 (Burlleson & 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, Humfrey, & 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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## **Communicating to Change Communication: Alcoholics' Romantic Partners' Mutual-aid Group Attendance in Relation to Communication with their Alcoholic Partners**

**Venla Kuuluvainen & Pekka Isotalus**

*Although the strain that a romantic partner's alcoholism puts on a relationship is well documented, less is known about the ways in which individuals deal with a malfunctioning relationship of this kind. This qualitative study explores one way of coping with a partner's alcoholism: attending Al-Anon, a world-wide network of mutual-aid groups for alcoholics' friends and families. This paper will look at Al-Anon members' perceptions of their communication experiences at Al-Anon in relation to their communication with their alcoholic partners. The research material is composed of interviews with Finnish Al-Anon members (n=19), as well as their writings (n=128), which have been analyzed thematically. The results show that Al-Anon attendance helps individuals to change their ways of communicating with their alcoholic partners by offering informational and emotional support. Furthermore, the organization also works as an arena for practicing these interpersonal skills. As a result, the partners became more accepting, and started to draw boundaries between themselves and the alcoholic. This again shifted the focus of the relationship from the alcoholics' drinking to themselves, and thus clarified their relationship.*

**M**utual-aid groups are based on mutual communication of support and are known to have positive effects on the interpersonal relationships (e.g., spousal and romantic relationships) of their members as well as having other benefits (e.g., Cline, 1999; Seebohm et al., 2013; Timko, Young, & Moos, 2012; Wright & Frey, 2007). The types of supportive communication that lie behind these relational effects, and the communication that exemplifies the relational effects, remain unclear, however. A unique arena for studying these connections can be found in Al-Anon—a world-wide network of mutual-aid groups for the friends and families of alcoholics, which aims specifically to help members to cope in an interpersonal relationship with an alcoholic. Indeed, the partners of alcoholics are known especially to engage in maladaptive communicative behavior that, in turn, has a negative effect upon their well-being as well as their relationship with the alcoholic (see Duggan & Le Poire-Molineux, 2009; Le Poire, 2004; Marshal, 2003). In Finland, where this study was conducted, more than 40% of the

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population is estimated to be affected by someone else's alcoholism (Al-Anon, 2015; Huhtanen & Tigerstedt, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to examine Al-Anon members' perspectives on their communication experiences at Al-Anon in relation to their communication with their alcoholic romantic partners. Using this approach, instead of merely describing the problems inherent in communicating with an alcoholic, this study sheds light on possible methods for resolving those problems. Of course, these connections are complex and not reducible to clear-cut causes and consequences. For this reason, we chose an interpretivist-oriented qualitative approach (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014) and examined Al-Anon members' own personal views about these connections. This kind of approach sheds light on the members' subjective understanding of their situations.

In order to examine the link between individuals' communication within Al-Anon and communication with their partners, we are utilizing the theoretical perspective of supportive communication. From this viewpoint, social support is seen as being conveyed through communication (Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, & Sarason, 1994; MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011). As sociological and psychological research into social support has shown, support benefits well-being (MacGeorge et al., 2011). The communication perspective, in turn, reveals the specific features of the supportive interactions that produce these effects (e.g., Burleson, 2009; Jones & Bodie, 2014). The communication perspective has also traditionally emphasized the relational outcomes of support (MacGeorge et al., 2011), as is the case in this study. The supportive communication perspective thus provides an analytical tool and a theoretical basis from which to view the communication processes in Al-Anon and their perceived effects on communication with an alcoholic romantic partner (henceforth partner).

### **The Interpersonal Relationship with an Alcoholic**

Alcoholism affects the whole family of an alcoholic negatively (e.g., Copello, 2010; Geddes, 1993; Orford, Velleman, Copello, Templeton, & Ibanga, 2010; Orford, Copello, Velleman, & Templeton, 2010; Schäfer, 2011; Segrin, 2001). In this study, we specifically concentrate on the relationships of alcoholics and their partners, given the negative effects that alcoholism has on such relationships and given that partners form the majority of Al-Anon's membership (Al-Anon, 2012).

In a relationship with an alcoholic partner, communication is a key aspect that is known to deteriorate (Duggan & Le Poire-Molineux, 2009; Le Poire, 2004; Orban, 2001; Segrin, 2001;

Wiseman, 1991). Indeed, the communication patterns of alcoholics' partners are often referred to by the popular term "codependency" (e.g., Cullen & Carr, 1999; Duggan & Le Poire-Molineux, 2009). According to Le Poire and her associates (Duggan, Dailey, & Le Poire, 2008; Duggan, Le Poire, & Addis, 2006), the communication of alcoholics' partners both reinforces and punishes the partner's substance use in an inconsistent fashion. Moreover, according to Le Poire, Hallet, & Giles (1998), the core problem in the alcohol-afflicted relationship is that neither party is able to talk openly about the contradictions in their communication. These kinds of communication patterns can be seen as being symptomatic of an ordinary person who is attempting to cope in a stressful situation (see Orford, Copello, Velleman et al., 2010; Orford, Velleman, Natera, Templeton, & Copello, 2013).

### **Al-Anon's Supportive Communication as a Means of Producing Change**

Although living with an alcoholic partner is highly stressful, the partners of alcoholics often suffer from a lack of outside support (Orford, Velleman, Copello et al., 2010) and thus they often turn to Al-Anon. Although Al-Anon is the biggest global organization offering help to the friends and families of alcoholics (O'Farrell & Clements, 2012), it has been little studied (e.g., Timko et al., 2013). The key message of Al-Anon that is of interest within this study is that the partners (and other loved ones) of alcoholics can learn more functional ways of being in the relationship with the alcoholic, and they can learn to live more satisfying lives, despite the alcoholic's path. Indeed, in a study by Timko et al. (2014), a more satisfying relationship with the alcoholic was reported to be one of the primary reasons for members' initial attendance at Al-Anon. The organization offers a 12-step mutual-aid program, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, following the ideology that members ought to "lovingly detach" themselves from their alcoholic partners/family members, instead directing their caring actions toward themselves and learning to rely on a power higher than themselves (Ablon, 1974).

The basic framework of Al-Anon consists of weekly meetings, during which members share their personal stories in turn. The interaction is highly structured (see Zajdow, 2002; Roth & Tan, 2007), and direct commenting on others' stories is not allowed. In addition to the weekly meetings, the organization also provides other arenas and ways of receiving and providing support, such as the sponsorship system and the possibility of doing service-work (see Kuuluvainen & Isotalus, 2014). Although the active ingredients of Al-Anon also include elements such as the Al-Anon literature and the



12-step program, we argue that even the knowledge of these is conveyed to new members through communication. Thus, the interactions among members is the foremost element of AI-Anon groups.

In this study, we view these interactions as supportive communication, which Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) define as “verbal and nonverbal communication produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid” (p. 374). The point of view of supportive communication was chosen because it has been generally associated with enhanced well-being, the development of coping skills, and greater relationship satisfaction (e.g., Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011; MacGeorge, Samter & Gillihan, 2005; MacGeorge et al., 2011).

Several types of supportive communication have been identified in previous literature, such as emotional support (which is provided to others “with the intent of helping another cope effectively with emotional distress”; Burleson, 2003, p. 553) and informational support or advice giving (which includes “recommendation about what might be thought, said or done to manage a problem”; MacGeorge, Feng & Thompson, 2008, p. 146). It has been claimed that different types of support are needed to benefit a support receiver, depending on the controllability of the support receiver’s situation. That is, problem-focused support has been claimed to be more preferred in relation to controllable events, with emotion-focused support being more preferable where uncontrollable events are concerned (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Previous research has shown that AI-Anon features both emotion- and problem-focused support (Kuuluvainen & Isotalus, 2013).

More importantly, the kinds of supportive communication that lie behind the specific outcomes of mutual-aid groups generally remain unclear. That is, although mutual-aid groups have been described as being beneficial to their members, the association between the specific aspects of these groups and the outcomes remains vague. In this study, we concentrate on supportive communication as one substantive element of mutual-aid groups, and its perceived association with the specific outcomes related to the partners’ communication in the interpersonal relationship with alcoholics. Thus, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: What kinds of supportive communication at AI-Anon do the partners see as being helpful in changing their communication in their relationship with the alcoholic?

## Recovering

Recovery from addictions such as alcoholism has been the subject of a number of studies (e.g., DeLucia, Bergman, Formoso & Weinberg, 2015; Schmid & Brown, 2008). However, it is rarely noted that alcoholics' friends and families can also recover from the effects of the situation, regardless of the alcoholic's abstinence or otherwise. Accordingly, there appears to be a gap in our knowledge about what options are available to people affected by alcoholics. In this study, we understand the term "recovery" to relate to any movement toward improved well-being. Here, attending Al-Anon can be seen as an indicator of recovery.

In general, a relationship with an alcoholic develops under the pressure of conflicting goals (e.g., Holmila, 2003; Wiseman, 1991; Zajdow, 2002). To give a more detailed explanation, according to Orford, Velleman, Copello et al. (2010, p. 51-55), family members affected by alcoholics ultimately have three options for responding to the situation: (a) putting up with it (b) withdrawing and gaining independence, or (c) standing up to substance misuse (see also Orford et al., 1998). Wiseman (1975; 1991) makes a more simple division between those individuals who sink deeply into isolation and despair and the minority of individuals who are able to change their perspectives and gain independence, whilst remaining in a relationship with an alcoholic.

Al-Anon aims to help partners to recover. Indeed, Al-Anon has been reported to enhance members' self-esteem, coping skills, and moods (see Barber & Gilbertson, 1997; Miller, Mayers, & Tonigan, 1999; Rychtarik & McGillicuddy, 2005; Timko et al., 2012). Although it is scarce, the previous research also implies that Al-Anon has positive effects on its members' relationships with an alcoholic partner (Barber & Gilbertson, 1997; Gorman & Rooney, 1979; Miller, Mayers, & Tonigan, 1999; Timko et al., 2012; Timko et al. 2013; Timko et al. 2014).

Accordingly, the final objective of this study aims to link the supportive communication found at Al-Anon with the partners' communication in the relationship with the alcoholic, viewed as one arena for executing recovery. Specifically, through this study, we seek to examine the members' views of the effects that their Al-Anon attendance had had on their communication within a relationship with an alcoholic partner. Furthermore, we seek to explore Al-Anon members' perceptions of what kinds of effects the changes in the partners' communication had had on their relationship with the alcoholic more generally. Thus, the additional two research questions were posed:

RQ2: How do the partners see that they have changed their communication within their relationship with the alcoholic after their Al-Anon attendance?

RQ3: How do the partners see that the change in their communication after Al-Anon has affected their relationship with the alcoholic?

## Method

### Participants and Data Collection

The research material is composed of (a) thematic interviews with Al-Anon members ( $n=19$ ) and (b) written answers given by Al-Anon members to an open question on a questionnaire ( $n=128$ ). Both the questionnaire and the interview data have been taken from several different Al-Anon groups in Finland. The primary purpose of the questionnaire was to collect information about what kind of supportive communication in Al-Anon had helped the partners in changing their relational communication with the alcoholic. The interviews focused more on the partners' relationship with the alcoholic and, in particular, on the partners' ways of communicating in the relationship. In addition, a research journal was kept in order to document the more tentative perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation and to stay reflective of the researchers' predispositions of the subject. The study follows the legal and ethical requirements of Finland and was approved by the Finnish Al-Anon central service.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire was sent to all Finnish Al-Anon groups through the Al-Anon central service in the spring of 2012. In Finland, there are approximately 140 Al-Anon groups (Al-Anon, 2012) and the questionnaire was offered to all interested parties. Al-Anon does not have a strict membership system, so the percentage of members responding cannot be calculated. For the purposes of this study, answers to one specific question ("Is there something specific about the group members' support that especially helps or has, at some point, helped you in your efforts to change your behavior toward your alcohol-dependent significant other?") were used as data. Of the 188 questionnaires returned, 128 partners of alcoholics answered this question. Of these respondents, 126 were women, one was a man, and one was unidentified. As a point of comparison, a survey of the Al-Anon membership found that 96% of the members were women (Al-Anon, 2012). The respondents' age groups and the number of years they had attended Al-Anon are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1****Questionnaire Respondents' Ages and Years in Al-Anon in Numbers and Percentages**


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<i>Age Group</i>				
Under 30	31 to 40	41 to 50	51 to 60	Over 60
1 (.8%)	14 (10.9%)	20 (15.6%)	29 (22.7%)	64 (50%)
<i>Years in Al-Anon</i>				
Less than 1	1 to 5	6 to 10	More than 10	
9 (7%)	37 (28.9%)	21 (16.4%)	61 (47.7%)	

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**Interviews**

Nineteen members of Al-Anon who were partners of alcoholics were interviewed in 2013 by the first author. At the time of the interviews, eleven of the interviewees were still in a relationship with the alcoholic partner, six were separated/divorced from the alcoholic who was the initial reason for attendance, and two were bereaved. Four of the interviewees who remained in a relationship with the alcoholic partner stated that their partners were currently sober and attended Alcoholics Anonymous. All of the interviewees were women; they ranged in age from 34 to 78 years old ( $M=59$  years) and had been members of Al-Anon for between 10 months and 45 years ( $M=10$  years). The interviewees were recruited by sending a request to participate in the study to all Al-Anon groups in Finland with the help of the Al-Anon central service. A few of the interviewees had also been recruited while collecting data for a previous study on Al-Anon (see Kuuluvainen & Isotalus, 2013). The interviews lasted between 0.5 hours and 1 hour 15 minutes and took place in the interviewees' homes, on private university premises, and in public libraries. The interview frame had three broad themes: life before Al-Anon, life when joining Al-Anon, and life while being a member of Al-Anon. The purpose of this kind of interview frame was to gain information about the changes that had happened in the members' lives after coming to Al-Anon. This structure also resembles the story structure used in Al-Anon meetings (Saulnier, 1994) and thus is a

familiar form for the members used when talking about their experiences.

The three major themes in the interviews included questions about the role of Al-Anon in different phases of the interviewees' lives and in the interviewees' relationships with an alcoholic partner. In general, the interviews focused on the partners' own communication patterns in the relationship. The interviewees were asked frequently to give practical or typical examples of their communicative behavior. In addition, the emphasis was placed on linking the interviewees' accounts about their relationships with their communication experiences at Al-Anon.

## **Analysis**

The questionnaire and the interview data was analyzed thematically (Richards, 2005) with the help of Nvivo computer software (see Bazeley, 2007) by the first author. Thematic analysis was chosen because it best suits such unexplored topics as those explored in this study (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014). First, the written transcriptions (175 pages, Times New Roman, 12-point, single-spaced) of the interview data were read several times. The analysis began by tentatively coding the data into two broad categories: "Before Al-Anon" and "After joining Al-Anon." A topical coding of the data within these two categories was performed. Then, the topical codes were again incorporated under clusters that formed more abstract upper-level codes.

Next, the questionnaire data was analyzed to create codes for the forms of supportive communication at Al-Anon that had helped the partners in their relationships with alcoholic partners. The analysis also began by topical coding of the data. After that, the topical codes were grouped together under upper-level codes. The interview data was also coded into these categories. The purpose of doing so was to test the coding system we had developed using the interview data. The interviewees appeared to have similar views as the questionnaire respondents regarding support within Al-Anon. During these analyses, the codes were constantly audited against new data and against each other, and an audit trail of the steps in the analysis was kept. Furthermore, all the codes were checked to ensure that they were in the right upper category, they did not overlap with other codes, and they were generally easy to use.

Lastly, the number of participants to which the main themes/codes were applied were counted in order to demonstrate their salience in the data. These numbers do not aim to claim how much something is expected to be found regarding the phenomena under investigation, but rather "how much a particular theme permeates data" (Manning & Kunkel, 2014, p. 39).

## Results

The results will be reported in three sections, according to the research questions. The first section deals with data relating to the supportive communication in Al-Anon that was thought to help the partners to alter their communication with the alcoholic. The second section represents the change experienced by the partners in their communication with the alcoholic after they joined Al-Anon. The third section describes the perceived effects that the partners' changed communication had had on their relationship with the alcoholic. The results are supported with data excerpts that have been translated idiomatically from Finnish into English. A summary of the coding category is provided in each section, including the salience of the main themes or codes in the data.

Finally, we want to remind the reader that although the results are presented chronologically, they do not aim to present causal connections but rather an overall story of change with the help of Al-Anon as experienced by the members.

### Supportive Communication in Al-Anon

Support through Al-Anon presented as being helpful in changing the partners' ways of communicating with their alcoholic partners included (a) informational support, (b) emotional support, and (c) Al-Anon as an arena for practicing interpersonal skills. A summary of this category is presented in Table 2 and is explained below.

**Table 2**

**A Summary of the Category “The Support of Al-Anon” and Number of Interviewees and Questionnaire Respondents (N=147) to which the Theme/Code was Applied**

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<i>Themes</i>	<i>Participants</i>
Informational Support to Educate Members	81
Emotional Support to Empower Members	84
Supportive Context for Practicing Interpersonal Skills	76

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**Informational support to educate members.** The communication at Al-Anon meetings was presented as a source of education. The other group members' experiences functioned as practical examples of how to deal with an alcoholic partner:

As they tell their own stories/experiences, how they have 'struggled' through, and survived, difficult experiences, something starts 'sprouting.' A long time after, I might remember some member's story and notice that it fits with my situation. I can then try to apply it, and notice that I feel better afterward. (Questionnaire 31)

The members had also been educated about the family disease concept of alcoholism, which enabled them to view their partners,' and their own, communication patterns as symptomatic of the family disease, and thus also allowed them to accept the behavior: "Often, the mere understanding that alcoholism is a disease changes the way that one acts toward the alcoholic" (Questionnaire 128).

In addition, the partners learned about the 12-step program, a set of guidelines with a specific ideology, supported by slogans, to be used as practical tools while communicating with the alcoholic. One interviewee described the significance of learning the 12-step program thus: "It gives you a clear value system; it gives you clear tools for how to act in different relationships" (Interview 11).

**Emotional support to empower members.** Along with information on how to do things differently, the meetings were described to empower the members to act and think differently: "Al-Anon members accept me as I am. When I learn to accept myself with the help of the group, I am also able to think warmly about the alcoholic" (Questionnaire 114). The meetings were described as being filled with warm looks and hugs, and feelings of mutual trust, acceptance, togetherness, love, friendliness, positivity, and empathy, which all generated the sense of being both heard and seen. In practice, this positivity was described as spreading to behavior at home and to interactions with the alcoholic.

The meetings and the anticipation of upcoming meetings also gave the interviewees the strength to make difficult decisions. In addition, other members' stories of recovery gave the partners hope for their own lives: "[...] that they have been able to become independent and grow, despite the alcoholic. It gives me hope that one day, I will also be able to do it" (Questionnaire 105).

**Supportive context for practicing interpersonal skills.** In addition to being a source of informational and emotional support, Al-Anon was presented as an arena for practicing interpersonal skills. For example, the meetings were seen as teaching the skills of listening and of tolerating differing views:

It is interesting that by going to the group, one may start to like all of the members in various ways, and then the alcoholic significant other's importance diminishes to the role where he belongs and does not rule one's whole life. (Questionnaire 26)

It was also recounted that at Al-Anon, the members were encouraged to talk about themselves, not the alcoholic, and accordingly were directed to pay more attention to their own behavior: "At Al-Anon, one member said: 'It was the alcoholic's problem that you just described; what about your own life?'" (Questionnaire 156).

In addition, these interactions were also thought to enable members to experience being functional members of a community, instead of being deviant. Al-Anon created a social network through which support also became available in between the group meetings: "My alcoholic significant other makes me nervous easily. A phone call and a conversation have helped me to act intelligibly" (Questionnaire 32).

### **Change in Partners' Communication after Joining Al-Anon**

The changes that took place in the partners' communication after they joined Al-Anon were represented to include a movement (a) from controlling to acceptance and (b) from displaying codependency to drawing boundaries. A summary of this category is provided in Table 3 and is explained below.

**Table 3**

#### **A Summary of the Category "Change in partners' Communication after Joining Al-Anon" and Number of Interviewees (n=19) to which the Theme/Code was Applied**

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-codes</i>	<i>Participants</i>
From Controlling to Acceptance	Controlling	14
	Acceptance	18
From Codependency to Drawing Boundaries	Codependency	18
	Drawing Boundaries	18



**From controlling to acceptance.** The interviewees recounted that before joining Al-Anon, they had made active efforts to control the alcoholic's behavior, including disposing of/hiding the alcohol and enforcing activities that made drinking impossible. Communication that was intended to control the drinking included such tactics as threats, supplication, and blackmail, but these tactics were often ineffective:

It was all wrong; it was just when he was drunk that I started telling him to go to treatment, not like I would think about what was a right moment and we would discuss it appropriately [...] because once the situation was peaceful again, I wouldn't dare to break the peace with anything like attempting to talk about going to treatment. Because then I tried to act in a way so that he wouldn't start drinking again. (Interview 6)

In contrast to attempts to control the alcoholic, the interviewees talked about striving to accept the situation after joining Al-Anon. In general, that meant that the partners had made efforts not to intervene in their alcoholic partners' undertakings:

I dropped the ball. What I mean is, before, I had insisted on justifying the wrongdoings and giving explanations for things like non-appearances or whatever [...] but then I was like, 'OK, you can do what you want to do.' But, of course, it was hard; you cannot change in a minute—but I just tried to act mechanically. Although, in a way, I still had the old tricks in mind. (Interview 6)

The interviewees also recounted avoiding conflicts with the alcoholic after joining Al-Anon. They reported the quiet recitation of the serenity prayer as being of great help in moments of incipient conflict. One member described her method of calming herself down in a moment of crisis: "In addition to the prayer, I think about the group—I hold their hands and they are all there for me, in a way" (Interview 5).

**From codependency to drawing boundaries.** In addition to active attempts to control the drinking before Al-Anon, the partners described themselves as merely reacting to the alcoholic's actions and thus displaying "codependency," explained by one interviewee as follows:

I couldn't be happy if he was not; if he was depressed, then I was, too. So that it [codependency] was strongly visible in the realm of emotions. And I kind of needed his approval for everything, like eye-contact, or anything, so that I could do it without some kind of conflict starting to evolve again. (Interview 4)

The partners described themselves as “out of control,” which included the partner retaliating against the alcoholic’s wrongdoings by attacking him. As a result, many of the partners recalled reaching a point where their own behavior had become so severe that there was no other possibility than to get help. One interviewee described her breaking point, which occurred after her alcoholic partner had said negative things about her:

I had a tantrum and well, I almost threw a can of buttermilk. I thought, what the heck? I’ll take the buttermilk can and throw it in his face. But then I thought, heck, I’ll have to clean it up myself. But I saw this kind of aggressiveness coming from myself and I understood that now I had to do something. (Interview 18)

In contrast, the interviewees mentioned pretending that everything was alright as another way of coping with the situation before Al-Anon. The partners had tried to avoid conflicts by seeking to please the alcoholic or to avoid dealing with the alcoholic altogether through such actions as listening to music, cleaning, or finding things to do outside the home.

Just as before joining Al-Anon, the partners described themselves as living along the alcoholic’s actions; afterward, they had made active efforts to draw boundaries between the alcoholic and themselves. This included actions such as being brave enough to disagree with the alcoholic, or, as one interviewee described, clearing a shelf for her own things in a closet. Another member said that participating in the interview, and also telling her alcoholic partner about it, was an example of the courage that she had found in herself after joining Al-Anon. In addition, the interviewees recounted instances of taking responsibility for their own well-being in the form of new hobbies, exercise, socializing, and so on:

In an alcoholic family, there is often shortage of money—as we had—but you go to movies and to some concerts anyway, and for me, it is important that I can detach myself; that I don’t stay. You stay easily, you see; you come home from work and you stay there. (Interview 18)

Paying attention to oneself also meant that the interviewees had made efforts to change their own maladaptive methods of communication. Indeed, in addition to feeling more serene after joining Al-Anon, the interviewees strived to act serenely toward their alcoholic partners. One member explained how she tried to apply the Al-Anon teachings when her partner was visibly intoxicated:

When you see that the other is drunk—how it brings irritation, hatred, all these feelings to the surface—then I at least try [to act] according to the teachings: somehow, not to criticize. Don’t criticize because the two things that an

alcoholic aims for are making the other person angry and getting the other person to feel guilty. (Interview 17)

The interviewees also talked about avoiding behaviors that would enable the alcoholic's drinking. Still, they stated that changing one's deep-rooted ways was extremely difficult.

### **Change in the Relationship with the Alcoholic after the Partners' Changed Communication**

According to the interviewees, the change in the partners' way of communicating after Al-Anon affected the relationship with the alcoholic by (a) moving the focus of the relationship from the alcoholics' drinking to the relational partners' own lives and by (b) clarifying the status of the relationship rather than lack of communication. The category representing this change is presented in Table 4 and is explained below.

**Table 4**

#### **A Summary of the Category "Change in the Relationship with the Alcoholic after the Partners' Changed Communication" and Number of Interviewees (N=19) to which the Theme/Code was Applied**

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-codes</i>	<i>Participants</i>
From a Focus on Drinking to a Focus on Oneself	Focus on Drinking	14
	Focus on Oneself	11
From Lack of Communication to More Clarified Relationship	Lack of Communication	13
	Relationship Clarification	17

**From a focus on drinking to a focus on oneself.** The interviewees reported that before joining Al-Anon the interaction in the relationship with the alcoholic partner revolved around the alcoholic's drinking. Although some of the interviewees stated that their partner had become sober before they attended Al-Anon, similar patterns were still stated to be visible in the relationship.

According to the interviewees, before Al-Anon the atmosphere in the relationship was characterized by tension due to the unpredictability of the alcoholic's behavior, including the happiness of the alcoholic's sober days and the chaos associated with the alcoholic's periods of drinking. The participants also recounted

that the sober days led to recurrent disappointments, since the sobriety did not last. In contrast to feeling hopeful, the partners feared the next relapse. One interviewee said that, in a way, she wished that her husband would start drinking again so that she could concentrate on something else, instead of monitoring him for signs of intoxication.

After the partners' attendance of Al-Anon, one prominent change in their relationships appeared to be that the focus moved away from alcohol and toward the partners' own, separate lives. In practice, the interviewees (those who had remained together with their partners) talked about living somewhat separate lives under the same roof:

Someone might say, 'What, don't you talk at all for the whole day [laughs]?' Well, you see, I would say that this is a way of accepting someone as they are. That if we are quiet, then we are quiet. We both have opportunities to undertake recreational activities separately because we have a rather big home and there are different rooms for these hobbies. (Interview 4)

In the interviewees' accounts, they reckoned that this kind of separateness brought peace to the relationship. Even those who felt that the atmosphere had not improved believed that such separation gave them inner peace, and thus eased being in the relationship with the alcoholic.

**From lack of communication to more clarified relationship.** Before Al-Anon, the partners and the alcoholics stated that they suffered from a lack of communication. One of the partners explained: "I smelled or saw that he had been drinking and that it was no use talking to him because the next day he wouldn't remember those things. So, it was very quiet; our coexistence became very quiet" (Interview 9). The interviewees stated that the relational communication was not equal or reciprocal and that they failed to connect with their partners or to discuss their problems. Sometimes, communication was totally absent.

After Al-Anon, the partners described the status of the relationship as being clearer. The interviewees told of increased or enhanced communication with their partners, or simply that through intrapersonal communication, they had a clearer view of the relationship.

Two kinds of effects of this clarification were apparent in the interviewees' recounts: renewed closeness to the alcoholic, or, in contrast, negative distancing from the alcoholic. For the first type, the clarification of the relationship had generated new kinds of closeness, which included the restoration of trust and understanding the value of the relationship. Becoming closer was especially the case among

those whose partner had found lasting sobriety and had also attended Alcoholics Anonymous, thus sharing the knowledge of the 12-step ideology:

It probably would be a different story if, well, if, for example, he went to AA and I didn't go to Al-Anon. I'm not that sure that we would still be together. Because there is ... it brings that kind of shared language and a shared view of the issue. (Interview 10)

In contrast, interviewees also recounted that the partners' Al-Anon attendance had generated negative distancing from the alcoholic that was different from the positive separateness that contributed to the relationship's functionality. This negative distancing was especially visible in the realm of physical proximity:

We are like old buddies; like friends, but I don't ... I see that that he doesn't evoke anything in me; there is a total stone wall—like an invisible stone wall there between us, so that if he comes really close [...] then I move a bit further away. (Interview 9)

Some of the couples' relationships had eventually ended in separation or divorce.

## Discussion

The results of this study describe the change experienced by the Al-Anon members, including the active ingredient of supportive communication, which helped to generate change in the partners' communication and, by extension, in the relationship with an alcoholic partner. In addition, these results provide a perspective on the concrete communication behaviors that embody this change. Thus, it breaks down the ideology of Al-Anon into a set of practical maneuvers generating the change. Indeed, the "big story" of 12-step groups (e.g., Denzin, 1987) clearly shaped the way in which the Al-Anon members spoke about their experiences.

The results show the change experienced by the members in a set of continuums, from controlling and codependent communication to the partners' acceptance of the situation and drawing of boundaries. And by doing so, the focus of the relationship moving from the alcoholic's drinking to the relational partners themselves and from the lack of communication to more clarified relationship.

First, it appears that before Al-Anon, the more the partners aimed to connect with their alcoholic partners by controlling and responding to the alcoholic's behavior, the more skewed the focus of the relationship became. The controlling and codependent communication found in this study echo the work of Le Poire et al.

(1998); they maintain that the regulation of immediacy and “altercentrism” function as a partner’s power base in an alcohol-afflicted relationship. That is, the partners regulate reinforcing and punishing communication in order to control the significant other’s substance use. The results also show that before Al-Anon, the partners had been unable to discuss these problems, and the relationship suffered from lack of communication as a result. Similarly, according to Le Poire et al., the basic problem in alcoholic relationships is the relational partners’ inability to recognize and discuss communication problems.

At Al-Anon, the partners learned to see their partners and themselves as separate individuals, thus resulting in the clarification of the status of their relationships (see also Holmila, 2003). The results of this study show, however, that this clarification of the relationship status could also be executed through intrapersonal communication. That is, although not all of the members had experienced actual improvement in the relational communication, they now had a clearer vision of the relationship and the way of communicating within it. Duggan and Le Poire Molineux (2009; see also Duggan et al., 2008; Wright, 2011) suggest that by communicating more consistently, partners can also strengthen the substance abuser’s commitment to abstinence.

Second, this clarification of the relationship status included the partners shifting the attention from the alcoholic and his drinking to themselves. Indeed, Duggan et al. (2006) claim that inconsistencies in partners’ communication leads to the focus remaining upon the substance abuser, thus directing attention away from the partner’s own shortcomings in the relationship. It was clearly visible in the participants’ accounts that in order to improve their way of living with their alcoholic partners, the partners actually had to cease their attempts to change the alcoholics’ behavior. Thus the partners’ way of changing their communication featured more attempts to accept than to change the current situation. This finding echoes the Al-Anon ideal of ceasing to carry the responsibilities of the alcoholic, and starting to take responsibility for one’s own well-being (e.g., Zajdow, 2002).

Interestingly, however, the majority of research studies and treatment programs that involve the families of alcoholics set the sobriety of the alcoholic as their final objective—some explicitly and some more implicitly (see Orford et al., 2013). In these studies and treatment programs, the goal of the family members changing their communication patterns with the alcoholic is usually that the alcoholic would decrease drinking, become compliant to treatment, or something similar. The findings of this study, however, show that focusing on the alcoholic and his drinking was part of the communication problems in the relationship. Instead, the Al-Anon

members participating in this study seemed to think that the key to change could actually be found in accepting the partner's alcoholism and allowing oneself to live one's own life. Indeed, although a few of the members who took part in this study reported that their alcoholic partner had become sober, the majority of the partners had learned to live with the drinking partner—or chose to divorce or separate.

In Orford, Velleman, Copello et al.'s (2010, p. 51-55) terms, the change described by the Al-Anon members could be seen as a shift from standing up to the partners' substance use or putting up with it, to withdrawing and gaining one's independence. According to Wiseman (1975; 1991), those partners of alcoholics who are able to engage in this kind of perspective change while remaining in the relationship with the alcoholic are in the minority. In this study, the supportive communication within Al-Anon was considered as one possible source of recovery for partners of alcoholics.

Indeed, for the participants in this study, Al-Anon offered an arena for dealing with their problems. All in all, the partners reported that there were three forms of support that helped them to change their communication with their alcoholic partners. Thus, although the optimal matching model (e.g., Cutrona & Russell, 1990) indicates that problem-focused support in controllable matters (such as changing the partner's own communication, according to the Al-Anon ideology) is preferable, the study participants reported that emotional support was also a beneficial type of support in terms of helping partners to change their communication patterns. It has been suggested that contextual elements, such as an emotional atmosphere, are important support mechanisms when the support receiver is not yet able to process the content of the supportive messages (Burlinson, 2009). In summary, even communication with alcoholics themselves, as just one element of partners' complicated situations, is profoundly complex, and change thus calls for several different types of support (see also MacGeorge et al., 2011; Cutrona & Suhr, 1994).

The results also revealed another element of support at Al-Anon: the provision of a context in which to practice interpersonal skills. Indeed, previous studies have shown that mutual-aid groups can function as arenas for interpersonal learning (see Cline, 1999). The results of this study show how Al-Anon, as a supportive context, offers the opportunity to experience being a functional part of a network of people and to rehearse the skills of self-monitoring, listening, and tolerance. Hence, although Ablon (1974) maintains that Al-Anon groups focus on information sharing, instead of the members' mutual relationships, the communication perspective taken here reveals the relational level of communication that exists within Al-Anon.

The limitations of this study include, first, the fact that the members who answered the questionnaire and those who were

interviewed were, for the most part, different people. The interviewees and the questionnaire respondents reported, however, that similar forms of support had helped them to change their communication patterns with their alcoholic partners. The second limitation is that those who participated in the study had presumably benefited from Al-Anon in some way, and thus were keen to talk about the organization in a positive manner. As all Al-Anon groups are voluntary, though, we can presume that all participants have benefited from Al-Anon in some way. Finally, it is also important to remember the interpretive nature of the study design. That is, the results of this study represent the researchers' interpretation of the Al-Anon members' subjective experiences as one possible story of change. Further research into methods for helping the families of alcoholics in general is necessary.

### Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that instead of focusing directly on the problems in close relationships, a positive change might also be generated through the relational partners' engagement in supportive interactions outside the relationship, such as in mutual-aid groups. This kind of approach provides an additional possibility to improve on close relationships, especially in situations in which partners are not able to communicate their problems within the relationship. However, the effects that supportive communication has on relationships outside the support situation represent an under-studied area, as the existing research has often dealt with the outcomes that supportive communication has on the relationship between the support provider and the receiver (see Burleson, 2003). Undoubtedly, Al-Anon and other mutual-aid groups for individuals dealing with challenges in close relationships are important contexts for investigating these issues more thoroughly.

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