How do the discussion forums of non-12-step alcohol online support groups (AOSGs) affect user understanding of what it means to be a problem drinker?

SALLY SANGER
UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD
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Introduction

- Terminology

- Background to the study

- Methods used

- Findings

Terminology

- 'Problem drinking'

- Non-12-step alcohol online support groups (AOSGs)

- 'Representations'

- Discussion forums

Background

- Why does it matter?

- **Belief affects action which affects outcome**

- Multiple explanations of problem drinking

- Where do these beliefs come from – do AOSGs and their forums play a role?

Methods used

- Qualitative two-arm study

- Analysis of forum postings, Groups A - C

- 22 semi-structured interviews, Groups A, C - F

- Six groups involved overall

- Analysed using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis and recoded using Brooks and King's template analysis

Table 1: Summary of group descriptions

Name	Brief description	Approach to recovery endorsed in information pages	Moderated?
Group A	Medium* size AOSG, based in the UK	Psychological therapy	Y
Group B	Very large* AOSG, based in Continental Europe	None in particular, neutral approach to drugs and alcohol	Y
Group C	Small* AOSG, based in North America	Medication based treatment	Y
Group D	Small* AOSG, based in North America	Own harm reduction programme	N
Group E	Medium* size AOSG, based in North America	Own moderate drinking programme	Y
Group F	Large* AOSG, based in the UK	No specific programme, promotes abstinence	Y

Findings: "No requirements of belief"

- Group representations

- "so on [Group D], one of the beauties of it is that we're really big on policing judgement, and whatever works for someone is whatever works" (Alan, Group D)

- "you know we have a policy that we don't say that "Come on, you've got to stop drinking."… nobody says you have to do it this way or you have to do it in this order." (Dawn, Group E)

"No requirements of belief" (cont.)

- "I liked in AA the support, particularly women's meetings, but what I didn't like was the insistence that certain beliefs must be had and that that was the only way to succeed. So what I truly like about [Group F] is that it offers that same support but without any particular requirements of belief." (Ariana, Group F)

Multiple, varied sources

- "Yeah, it really [was] a mix of multiple sources and information for me to change the way that I think about alcohol. [As well as experience within the family] it was a mix of educational sources from the people that I met and my intensive outpatient program from rehab, from AA sources, from reading books, from *Rational Recovery*, I read that book, you know reading the AA literature and books and getting educated on the forums….I've learned a ton" (Alan, Group D)

Selecting information

"Well what I did is I took in all the information, cos I like, I've read probably 100 books on alcohol use…and I've read all kinds of different pages online and everything I could get my hands on. I immersed myself in it, but then what I'd do is I sieved it, you know, I sieved it through and I hold on to what connects to my reality, and so what I came up with is just <u>my</u> reality…. I get all the information but then I make up my own mind. I haven't had anything influence me, super, like I just figure out what I think." (Tina, Group F)

Do beliefs matter to users?

- "There were always people who you were like-minded with and I could always take the attitude of, you know I'll hang onto that and forget about the rest." (Robert, Group F)

- "I just think well, you know, they think that, I'm not sure I do yet." (Erin, Group F).

- "I certainly wouldn't have felt comfortable with the approach of AA or anything like that" (Anna, Group A)

Findings: "Someone like me"

- Not a 'normal' drinker – but not an 'alcoholic'

- "for me people with drink problems had lost everything and here were just women who, you know, were managing to be a mother and managing to go to work every day and yet were just drinking too much every night." (Cara, Group F)

"Someone like me" (cont.)

- Recognising oneself:

- "slowly, but surely it drip feeds into your consciousness and you think, "Yeah I'm recognising myself… I am a problem drinker, you know I'm an addicted drinker" so I think it helped a lot really with kind of coming to terms with that." (Isabelle, Group F)

- "we're going to change the world, we're not going to make alcohol normal anymore. And that, you wouldn't get that without a group" (Theresa, Group F)

Findings: Learning what is possible

- Longitudinal and cumulative effect over time

- "that for me was the main [impact of the forums]…having people like lay a path for you saying, "Trust us it will get better"… as you go along various milestones you think, "Yeah they were telling the truth", so you believe that the next milestone will also be the truth, you know. I think that's something that counselling and your doctor and that can't give you, it's that like wisdom, isn't it, of thousands of people collected in one space." (Isabelle, Group F)

- Learn what does and doesn't work

Conclusions

- Forums do contribute to users' beliefs in variety of ways – but they are one source among many

- Does it matter which belief set a group endorses? At a high level, in terms of approach, yes

- Should this be considered in matching users to groups? Again, yes in terms of approach

- Every case is different

- Most important: be aware of the wide range of groups out there!

Thank you!

- Any questions?

Methods cont.

- 500 forum posts per group

- NVivo 11

- Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis

- Inductive and deductive codes

- 22 interviews (phone, Skype, email, face-to-face)

- Coded in Nvivo 11 using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis

- All data re-coded using Brooks & King's template analysis

Table 2: Interviewees

Name of group	Interviewee pseudonyms
Group A	Anna
Group B	------
Group C	Ben, Cathy, Julie, Marianne
Group D	Alan, Bethany
Group E	Christine, Dawn, Jackie, Joe
Group F	Ariana, Cara, Erin, Grace, Isabelle, Joanne, Megan, Robert, Theresa, Tina, Yvonne

Findings: learning from experience

- Place to acquire knowledge arising from experience

- Practical tips and tools

- "everything that's been written there is there… There's threads on what to do in your first 30 days, there's threads on, you know, what to do if you're going through a divorce…You know information from trial and error and what's worked for many individuals. (Christine Group E)