

Identifying with other people suffering from alcoholism in an e-mediated and cross-cultural venue

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Abstract and Objective

To reach a common ground for identification is regarded as one of the most important success factors for self-help groups. The members should be able to relate to each others' experiences so that they feel that they are part of the "we-ness". In this study we explored two Alcoholics Anonymous Internet groups with an international membership. The objective was to explore the members' experiences of participating in an international AA self-help group. The research questions are: How does using e-meetings, e-mail lists and electronic bulletin boards with an international and cross-cultural membership influence on the process of identifying and thus on the members' rehabilitation processes? Are they able to find a common ground of identification? Data were obtained over the course of one year by means of participant observation in two online AA groups and e-mail interviews with 11 online AA members. Results suggest that members can easily identify with each other. Two things seem to bridge the potential gap between members from different countries and cultures: The AA members' view of alcoholism as a global disease with similar symptoms, and the experience of AA's conceptual framework as a universal language.

Keywords:

Internet, Self-help groups, Alcoholics Anonymous

Methods

The study had a qualitative approach. Data were obtained over the course of one year by means of participant observation and e-mail interviews with 11 members from different countries. The first author participated in two online AA groups by posting and responding to the topics in the e-mail meeting, bulletin board and discussion forum. The 11 e-mail interviews were semi-structured and asynchronous, that is, they were not conducted in real-time but over a period ranging from five weeks to three months.

Results

Members reported no difficulties with identifying with each other when using Internet-based AA groups. Alcoholism is viewed as a global disease with very much the same symptoms regardless of geographical or cultural location. Most members reported a positive attitude towards basing their meetings on the Internet and on the international membership and they felt that it enhanced their recovery process in different ways. Lack of nearness and closeness was an issue among some members, who preferred face-to-face contact with other members via their local AA groups. However, most members experienced the text-based and e-mediated communication form as equally or even better suited for providing a venue for close and intimate relationships.

Conclusion

Internet Self-help groups with an international membership seem to have provided AA members the opportunity to "customise" their recovery program and support network in a way that suits their particular needs and life situations, and in ways that transcend their native culture. Today there exists thousands of Internet self-help groups, many of them with an international membership. In course of time, the Internet is going to be accessible to more and more people around the world, and language may be less of a problem. Research on online self-help groups with international membership is important in understanding the development of the Self-Help movement as a whole.