



1/2016 SSKH NOTAT – SSKH REPORTS AND DISCUSSION PAPERS

WHAT CAN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE LEARN FROM RESEARCH ON ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS?

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SSKH Notat 1/2016

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Svenska social- och kommunalhögskolan vid Helsingfors universitet, 2015 Helsingfors

ISBN 978-951-51-1711-3 (PDF)

ISSN-L 1457-1250

ISSN 1798-6966 (Online)

<http://sockom.helsinki.fi/info/notat.html>

SSKH Notat

*Svenska social- och kommunal högskolan
vid Helsingfors universitet*

1/2016

ABSTRACT

This article presents a selective review of scholarly approaches to online support groups, in order to assess the relevance of current research to social work practice, and to suggest future directions. We have found that methodological individualism thrives in the literature, and studies on issues such as the dynamics of the client and the professional in online support are comparatively rare. With our focus on client work, we argue that the development of social work practices would benefit from a more explicit investigation of the interaction between clients and professionals in research concerning online support groups.

Keywords: online support groups, online social work, selective literature review, social support, Doise categorization model

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies have become a central part of our everyday life, and people suffering from emotional distress or physical illnesses often look for advice and support online. NGO's have acknowledged the opportunities that online tools can provide people in difficult situations, and many now offer help and support on the internet. Organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous (<http://aa-intergroup.org>) and Parents, Family & Friends of Suicides (www.pos-ffos.com) provide their clients with online support groups, but in public sector social work practice these types of services are still quite rare. The benefit of online groups is the interaction between clients and the support they can give to each other. Using online group settings that are open to view for those other than the group participants can also benefit a large number of people with similar problems (Meier 2008).

The starting point of this article is that social work, and especially group work practices, would benefit from a stronger collaboration with researchers who study online support groups. When it comes to blending online practice into social work with groups, some researchers suggest that the first step could be to introduce existing online groups to clients who may benefit from them (Meier 2004; 2011; Zamani et al. 2013). We argue that to realize this aim, more practice-oriented social work research is needed.

The goal of this study is to explore existing research on online support groups that would be beneficial for developing online social work group practice. For this purpose, we assess the current state of the art by way of a selective literature review. Traditionally, review articles provide an overview of the knowledge produced on a specific topic. In that sense, this article is not traditional as the focus of the review is on the research itself. We are interested in the scientific positioning and perspectives on online support groups, as presented in the research selected for this review.

We focused our enquiry on the term *online support group* as it is used in scholarly literature to refer to the aspects of social work we are interested in: online interaction, the aim of providing support, and a group format. Wood & Smith (1995, 117) defined the concept as “*a type of social support group that meets*

online and provides participants the opportunity to give and receive positive feedback to and from another". The activity of sharing social support over the internet defines an online support group, more than the particular technical platform on which these activities occur. Platforms for online support groups vary from e-mail lists to groups formed on social networking services. These groups tend to be self-organized without professionals facilitating the discussions, and often, some of the participants take the role of a moderator (Tanis 2007). Online platforms specially organized by professionals do however exist. In this review, we are interested in studies involving both facilitated and self-organized groups, to assess whether the studies on online support groups approach their topics from the viewpoint of the client or the professional, or from a wider organizational or societal perspective. Additionally, we study social work practice which puts the clients in focus, and as such we have not considered support groups aimed at social work students or practitioners.

Based on our review, in existing state of the art studies on online support groups the role of the professional is portrayed as marginal. To strengthen the relevance of this research for the development of social work practices, we argue that a more explicit investigation of the interaction between clients and professionals is needed. Finally, we offer possible solutions which may help to implement this approach to developing future research on online support groups in social work practice.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This review examines the levels of analysis by which online support groups have been approached in social scientific research. To reflect this aim, we focused on databases that cover the field of social sciences, including social services. These include EBSCO (Academic Search Complete), ProQuest, and Web of Science.

We examined these databases for peer-reviewed journal publications with the search term "online support group" in their abstract. We focused our enquiry on *online* support groups, so as to emphasize interaction which occurs through networks of computers connected to the internet, i.e. computers online. We excluded parallel concepts such as *computer-supported*, *computer-mediated*, *electronic* and *virtual support groups* to emphasize the connectivity and human interaction, and not just the devices used. We expected this framing to be sufficiently illustrative for the purposes of demonstrating the relative prevalence of different approaches in studies of online support groups. Moreover, in practice, the focus on the term *online support group* was not as exclusive, as we noticed that the parallel concepts were used interchangeably even within a single publication.

Altogether, the searches of the three databases returned 128 publications. The time span of publication covered a period from 1997 to January 2016. Several publications (49) appeared in each of the three databases. We excluded 43 publications that mentioned online support groups mainly as research material for studying other phenomena (such as the construction of the online self), or as a site for recruiting subjects. Thus, we included 85 publications for further analysis, spanning a period from 2003 to 2015.

The search returned only publications in English, probably due to the use of an English search term. The online support groups featured were mostly Anglophone, with the majority of the participants being from the US, UK and Australia. Not all of the publications mentioned the languages used in the online support groups that they studied, but we assume that these were likely to be Anglophone as the authors analyzing the material were Anglophone speakers. A few publications however (n=17) studied non-Anglophone online support groups, including those conducted in German, Dutch, Israeli, and Chinese.

The search returned research articles from a wide variety of journals. Altogether, studies from 58 different journals were included in this review, with the journal *Computers in Human Behavior* appearing most frequently (n=8). In addition to journals that focused on computer-mediated communication, the search also returned journals targeted towards health practitioners, such as *Patient Education and Counseling* (n=4), *Psycho-Oncology* (n=4), and the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (n=4). Many of the journals featured in the returns cover the particular issue that the support group in question is concerned with, for example *Archives of Suicide Research* (n=2), *Gastroenterology Nursing* (n=1) and *Appetite* (n=1).

To assess how well current literature manages to meet the needs of developing online social work practice, we use Doise's (1986) categorization of the levels of explanation in experimental social psychology as our framework. Doise's framework allows us to distinguish those levels of analysis which may be lacking and those which are over-represented. Doise's categorization includes four levels: 1) the intra-personal level 2) the inter-personal and situational level 3) the positional level, and 4) the ideological level. With the intra-personal level, Doise refers to changes such as those in an individual's wellbeing, their emotions or opinions that can be measured by analyzing the individual. The inter-personal level and situational level extends this view to phenomena occurring either between individuals or within a situation, such as processes of interaction within a group. The positional level introduces the social categories that the participants in the interaction situation represent, such as their different ethnic group or social status, and assesses how these affect the interaction between the individuals. Studies on the ideological level consider the larger cultural context of the interaction. They examine how the values, norms and understandings shared within a culture are formed in interaction, and how they affect the way we orient ourselves to each other and to our surroundings. As Doise (1986) stresses, these levels are not a reflection of reality, but analytical distinctions that researchers make to help focus the issue they aim to address within their studies.

In regard to social work with groups, Doise's (1986) levels could be interpreted as follows: On the intra-personal level, the group is used as a tool when dealing with an individual client's personal problems. It is the level where the client is directed to the group to get help and support with coping with and solving existing problems, or to prevent the occurrence of anticipated problems. On the inter-personal and situational level, interaction between clients is essential. The group members can support each other in maintaining a level of functioning if a risk of deterioration occurs. The positional level can be interpreted as the level which addresses client-professional interaction in a group. This interaction is

especially important in professionally-led groups with an educational or therapeutic character. Finally, we modified Doise's ideological level according to our interests. We chose to term the ideological level as the organizational/societal level, and this allows us to identify whether the studies reviewed situate online support groups in their organizational or societal context.

FINDINGS

In the following section, we first present how our sample of studies on online support groups adapted to each level of analysis of the framework. This illustrates how the levels of analysis occur in these publications from a qualitative perspective, and also how the levels differ from each other. Finally, we summarize the distribution of these approaches within our sample, and depict which approaches appear together. This qualitative examination of our sample gives an insight as to how the different viewpoints expressed in the studies of online support groups could be used to further develop social work practice.

Drawing from the abstracts of the 85 publications included in the study, we analyzed their descriptions of the research problem, so as to categorize them into one or more of the levels of our framework. Doise (1986) reminds us that a single study can reflect multiple levels of analysis, and this is also the case with our review. Rather than categorizing individual publications with a single strictly defined analytical approach, our main interest is to reveal the prevalence of a variety of analytical levels. Thus, one publication may be categorized to one or more categories. Within this paper, we provide some illustrative examples of the publications included in each level of the analysis.

INTRA-PERSONAL LEVEL: INDIVIDUAL CLIENT

On the intra-personal level, we identified expressions that were interpreted to represent analysis undertaken on the client level. The publications focused on how the individual client's intrapersonal processes were affected by their participation in an online support group, and vice versa, how individual factors affected the probability of participating in online support groups, and how such participation affected the individual. We distinguished three types of empirical investigation that serve to assess these effects: self-report measures, observations, and qualitative analyses of open-ended questions. This level of analysis was the most prevalent in our analysis, being identified in 57 instances.

The majority of the instances included in this level ($n=23$) assess the effects of online support groups by using survey questionnaires consisting of established psychological self-report measures. For example, measures of depression such as the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression [CES-D] scale and its revised version (CESD-R) were used to assess the effects of organized online support groups (see, e.g. Klemm 2012; Lieberman et al. 2003; Lieberman et al. 2005). Mostly, the studies indicate that participation in the online support group correlated with decreased depression levels as measured with these scales. However, Batenburg & Das (2014) claim that active participation in an online support group decreases levels of depression only if the participants score highly on emotional expression.

Eight studies included in this level assessed the precedents of participation in an online support group, rather than its effects. The studies used self-reports to identify intra-individual factors that are connected with the probability of joining online support groups, such as a problem-focused coping style (Wright & Rains 2014), the clinical profile of the condition that the group relates to (Darcy and Dooley 2007), and perceived vulnerability and self-efficacy (McKinley & Ruppel 2014). Mo and Coulson (2010a) distinguished between different types of participation. In their questionnaire, the respondents self-reported whether they had ever posted any messages to the group, or whether they only read the messages. Then, the authors compared the “posters” to the “lurkers”, in regard to a range of psychological measures, including the CESD-R. Posters were found to be more satisfied with their relationships with other group members than lurkers. However, the authors concluded that online support groups could also be beneficial for lurkers, given that no significant differences were found.

Nine of the publications addressing the intra-individual level observed the interactions in an online support group. While social support was operationalized with self-report measures by Malik and Coulson (2011a) and Mo and Coulson (2010b), Tichon and Yellowlees (2003) observed the use of clauses that they interpreted as support, to argue that social support can be acquired in online support groups. Barak and Dolev-Cohen (2006) and Kernsmith and Kernsmith (2008) operationalized participation by calculating the number of messages posted. They found that higher activity levels in the group correlated with benefits such as lower levels of distress. Love et al. (2012) and Frost and Massagli (2008) categorized the contents of online support groups, and concluded that individuals use the groups for purposes such as coping with “difficult emotions through expression” (Love et al. 2012, 555) and “to foster and solidify relationships based on shared concerns” (Frost & Massagli 2008). They did not however compare how the acquisition of these benefits related to the level of participation in the groups.

Shaw et al. (2007; 2008) and Han et al. (2012) connected observations to survey measures. Shaw et al. (2007; 2008) observed online interaction by using word counting programs. They found that the use of first-person pronouns correlates with survey measures of negative emotions. The use of religion-related words was negatively correlated to negative emotions, and positively correlated to functional well-being and self-efficacy. Han et al. (2012) examined the precedents of online support group participation instead of its effects, and found that even patients diagnosed with the same condition, differ in their ways of using an online support group.

A further 15 publications in our review assessed the benefits of online support groups with a data-driven approach to open-ended survey questions. In general, the authors identified benefits that participants in online support groups claimed to experience by analyzing answers to open-ended questions. The authors identified such benefits as the online group providing opportunities for: “*exchanging stories*”, “*gaining hope*” (Hess et al. 2010, 220), “*access to a more heterogeneous mix of people*” (Coulson & Knibb 2007, 147), “*accessible and safe environments in which to discuss difficult topics in privacy*” (Street et al. 2012, 1). However, Holbrey and Coulson (2013) and Mo and Coulson (2014) point out some possibly disempowering processes of participating in online support groups, such as “[r]eading about the negative experiences of others”

(Holbrey & Coulson 2013, 51) or “declining real life relationships” (Mo & Coulson 2013, 983). Our interpretation is that these analyses aim to catch participants’ individual experiences of online support groups and therefore connect to the intra-individual level. However, one publication that we included in this category but considered to represent all of the subcategories, is Barak et al.’s (2008) review on studies that cover the benefits and costs that participation in online support groups provides for the individual. The review provides an overview of the factors that “*potentially affect participants*” (p. 1867), and this description offers a good illustration of the research that we include on the level of the individual client.

INTER-PERSONAL LEVEL: INTERACTION BETWEEN CLIENTS

Reflecting on Doise’s inter-personal level, we identified studies that approached the topic on the level of interaction between specific individuals in online support groups. Instead of focusing on intra-individual processes, the studies in this category included the emergence of social support in the observed interactions between members of online support groups. We determined 34 instances of studies falling under this approach, and identified three types of studies which focus on interaction between clients: 1) content analysis to identify support, 2) approaching support as an interpersonal process; and 3) operationalizing online interaction to analyze the effects of different types of interaction.

The most common method used in these studies was content analysis, using the messages posted in online support groups as research material. In the studies using content analysis (n = 31), we distinguished two types of goals. Sixteen (16) studies assessed the amount of interaction in the online support groups, and studied phenomena such as “*social support*” (Coulson et al. 2007, 175; Shi & Chen 2014), “*empathy*” (Kernsmith and Kernsmith 2008, 226), or “*self-help mechanisms*” (Malik and Coulson 2011b, 439). We identified 15 studies which did not impose predefined concepts upon the content, but instead focused on the processes through which the phenomenon of interest (such as social support) was produced in the interactions between the group members.

In addition to content analysis, three studies employed the tracking of posted messages (Klemm 2012; Gilat & Sharar 2007) and self-reports (Klemm 2012; Lieberman et al. 2005). These methods were used to operationalize how features of interaction, such as the level of moderation in groups (Klemm 2012), or the homogeneity of the group (Lieberman et al. 2005) contributed to the effectiveness of the group.

POSITIONAL LEVEL: CLIENT-PROFESSIONAL INTERACTION

Studies that were placed in Doise’s positional level view online support groups not solely from within the group, but also as situations in which individuals who represent different social positions interact with each other. As our interest is on features that can potentially be used in social work, we focus on studies that cover the relations between the positions of the client and professional. The amount of the instances positioned in this category was considerably smaller than in previous categories. Only eight (8) instances of this approach occurred within our sample. Three of these instances pinpointed the effects of having a

professional or trained volunteer to moderate the group or to interact with the clients. The benefits are cited to include increased participation (Klemm 2012), less frequent threats of suicide (Gilat & Sharar 2007), and various psychological benefits (Lepore et al. 2011). Three further instances analyze the strategies that professionals use, such as “*work-arounds’ for addressing shortcomings of the internet as a medium for delivering psychosocial services*” (Owen et al. 2009, 144), and strategies for managing distress when interacting with clients (Gilat et al. 2011; 2012). Furthermore, two studies addressed the implications of participation in online support groups for client-professional relationships. Coulson and Knibb (2007) surveyed how online support group participants used information acquired in the group with their healthcare providers, and found that “*not all health professionals appeared to welcome such empowered patients*” (Coulson & Knibb 2007, 147). Stewart Loane & D’Alessandro (2014) were more hopeful in arguing that “*The traditional asymmetric relationship between patient and doctor is challenged by this new form of educated, empowered health consumer who is able to work in partnership with medical service providers*”. Both observations point towards the broader question of the organizational and societal issues that online support groups touch upon. A concrete example of this concerns how professionals adjust to the knowledge that clients acquire from online support groups (Coulson & Knibb 2007). However, we found out that a vast majority of the publications in our sample did not define their research problem on this more abstract level.

IDEOLOGICAL LEVEL: ORGANIZATIONAL AND SOCIETAL

We included two (2) studies in the organizational and societal category. In a participatory case study, Radin (2006) explicitly claims that online support groups function as a “*political action*”, permitting clients to challenge the authority of professionals and thus empower non-professionals in new ways. The second publication included in this category was Stewart et al.’s (2011) study on the effectiveness of an online support group to support parents of children with a condition. This study differs from studies that we placed in other categories, as it involves the clients in the iterative development of the system. While Stewart et al. (2011) detaches the online support group from its societal surroundings, they still consider it as a system that involves a range of actors from the client to the professional, and including the developers of the system.

To summarize the overall distribution of viewpoints identified in our sample, the studies mainly appear to be targeted towards the client. We identified 57 instances of the *intra-individual* level of analysis. *Interaction between clients* was identified in 34 instances. We identified only eight instances involving the viewpoint of the professional, and at the *organizational and societal* level that reflects Doise’s ideological level, the number of identified instances was two.

We identified 45 publications which solely represented the viewpoint of the *client*. In ten cases we identified the viewpoint of the *client* to be represented simultaneously with an *interaction between clients* approach. In a further four cases, the viewpoint of the *client* was represented simultaneously with the level of *client-professional interaction*. The *organizational/societal* level overlapped with other levels in both of the instances we positioned under it: in the case of Stewart et al. (2011) it overlapped with the *individual* level, and in Radin (2006) it overlapped with the *interaction between clients* approach.

DISCUSSION

To determine gaps in the research (especially concerning knowledge that would be useful for the development of social work practices), Doise's framework of the levels of analysis in experimental social psychology allowed us to discern the relative prevalence of different approaches in social scientific studies of online support groups. Considering social work practitioners, the most relevant gaps are the neglected viewpoints of professionals, and the issue of interaction between the client and the professional. Most studies concern the effects of support groups on the individual, and the interaction which takes place between clients. However, some recent studies (such as Owen et al. 2009; Gilat et al. 2011; 2012) consider the issue of professional involvement in social support groups.

We found that studies on online support groups rarely consider Doise's ideological level, and studies that frame online support groups as a socio-political issue are in the minority. Although such studies could exist outside our review, this lack of available analysis is a concern for social work practitioners. The lack of research on online support as a part of organizational and political processes affects the development of these services, and thereby affects the whole profession.

The framework appeared to function well in showing how the current knowledge on online support groups is divided across scholarly approaches. We expected that including the term "group" would return more studies that approach the topic on a group level, looking at the interaction which takes place between individuals. Instead, it appeared that including the concept of a "group" does not exclude the possibility of approaching the topic on an individual level – for example, by studying the effects of the group on the individual. We therefore consider our analysis as illustrative of the current landscape of social scientific research on online support groups, showing which perspectives receive most attention and which are less studied. We expect this mapping to be relevant in guiding the design of future studies to inform social work practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The review captures what is going on in the field of social scientific research on online support groups. The research seems to focus on examining the participant (or client) experiences and the interaction between participants. However, this narrow research base may have a negative effect on the development of online group work for social work practice, in that it is difficult to start the development and promotion of a practice when the scientific knowledge of its mechanisms, or pros and cons is scarce.

Only a few of the reviewed articles researched groups which were supervised by professionals. This could indicate that there are few professionally supervised online support groups in the field of social and therapy work to examine. Nevertheless, social work practice is in a process of change, and this merits exploring the potential of online environments. Group action and interaction is characteristic for these environments, and utilizing existing, well-functioning online

groups could be one way of starting to blend online and offline practices (e.g. Jones & Meier 2011). According to the reviewed research, professionally supervised online support groups have some considerable advantages compared to groups consisting only of peers. On the positional level between professionals and clients, current research focuses on the benefits that having a moderator might provide for the group, including issues of increased participation (Klemm 2012), less frequent suicide threats (Gilat & Sharar 2007), and various psychological benefits (Lepore et al. 2011). The benefits of the group having a professional supervisor are important to acknowledge when developing social work practices, and would benefit from further research. Also, some studies such as Owen et al. (2009), Gilat et al. (2011) and Gilat et al. (2012) acknowledged the problems that online interaction may impose on facilitating support groups, and pinpointed strategies that professionals may use to overcome them. For example a lack of non-verbal and visual cues, or technical and literacy challenges can make online practices difficult. Meeting face to face is considered to be very important for forming a confident relationship between the social worker and the client (Broadhurst & Mason 2014), yet there is also research that argues that the client-professional relationship can be as adequate in online as in face-to-face therapeutic practice (e.g. Holmes & Foster 2012; Kiluk et al. 2014; LaMendola 2010).

Although we found only a few studies focused on an organizational/societal level, these studies seem to acknowledge the shift in how expertise is understood in professional practices. In online support groups clients can question and discuss professional practices, and by sharing their experiences and knowledge, they can support, learn from and empower each other. Involving clients in research and the development of new social work practices is a current trend (e.g. Beresford & Boxall 2012; Loughran & McCann 2013; Tew, Holley & Caplen 2012). Participatory methodology promotes inclusion, which is essential when working with vulnerable groups of people with varying ICT skills (Isomäki & Kuronen 2013). Therefore the development of online social work practices would benefit from practice or action oriented research, combining professional and service user experiences and expertise, and having clients and social workers planning and carrying through the research and development projects together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Oskar Öflund foundation for the grant that made it possible for us to work on this article.

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ISBN 978-951-51-1711-3 (PDF)

ISSN-L 1457-1250

ISSN 1798-6966 (Online)

SVENSKA SOCIAL- OCH KOMMUNALHÖGSKOLAN VID HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
SWEDISH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI