

Title: PARAMETRIC ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS AS PREDICTORS OF LONG-TERM DRINKING

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Summary: Multiple studies have implicated the importance of social support and/or social networks in determining drinking outcomes for those with alcohol problems. Nonetheless, there is little agreement about how to measure support and/or network characteristics. Some studies have used complex scoring systems, while other studies have employed relatively simple measures such as percent of abstainers/drinkers in a person's network. Social networks are complex and poorly understood. The goal of our secondary data analysis study was to ascertain what aspects of social networks are most strongly associated with subsequent drinking. The large Project MATCH data base makes it possible to conduct parametric studies to address these questions. The two study arms provide a form of replication. We studied the capacity of 6 social network characteristics derived from the Important People and Activities interview, measured at 2 points in time (baseline and study month 9), to predict long-term drinking outcome (at study month 15). The characteristics were number of abstainers, heavy drinkers, actively pro-abstinence network members, actively pro-drinking members, abstinent activities, and drinking activities. Using a Bonferroni alpha level of .001, we found that baseline network characteristics do not predict drinking whether or not covarying for month 9 network characteristics; however, some month 9 characteristics were strong predictors. The predictors of drinking outcome were number of abstinent activities (3 of a possible 4 positive tests across 2 arms by 2 dependent variables), pro-drinking persons (3 positive), drinking activities (2 positive), and pro-abstinence persons (1 positive). All associations were in the predicted direction. Interpretation of these initial results is complicated by the likely presence of self-selection biases. Since people can choose at least some network members/activities, the apparent effects of network variables could be due to motivation or another confounding factor. Nonetheless, these results suggest that (1) consistent with earlier findings, the mere presence of abstainers/drinkers is less important than whether these persons actively promote drinking vs. abstinence (especially if promoting drinking); and (2) developing abstinent activities seems beneficial, while avoiding drinking activities seems helpful at least for some persons.

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