

Hierarchies of knowledge in responses to messages of newbies in online health support groups

Barbara De Cock & Carolina Figueras Bates

Experiential knowledge, understood as the epistemic competence that comes from the lived experience, represents, together with emotional assistance, one of the defining features of peer online health support forums. The nature of this knowledge, and its potential to improve the outcomes of traditional treatments (Mazanderani, Locock, & Powell 2012), has been the focus of investigation in recent years in the areas of social science and mental health (e.g., Blume 2017; Noorani et al. 2019). The growing interest for experiential knowledge stems from the increasing importance of the role of patients' experiences as the grounds for decision-making in the medical arena.

According to Herrero et al. (2021), discussion threads in online health forums represent a form of interactive communication within a group of individuals who share a similar lived experience. In relation to the nature of the information traded off in those discussion threads, several studies have concluded that online support groups for mental health conditions (depression, schizophrenia, eating disorders) present a high number of emotional posts. Instead, online support forums for individuals suffering from diabetes largely focused on providing informational aid to recognize and understand the symptoms, with a focus on managing the condition, rather than curing it (Deetjen & Powell 2016).

Within this framework, in the present study we focus our attention on the first message of new members and its responses in two different Spanish online forums: a support group for diabetes and a support group for eating disorders. These first messages are particularly important since they are often posted by recently diagnosed persons or individuals who are still awaiting diagnosis and who have a lot of questions. The specific aims of the present study are the following: a) to pinpoint the concrete kinds of knowledge displayed in the responses to the first post; b) to examine how the role of expertise and knowledge is linguistically construed in those responses; c) to determine whether hierarchies of epistemic and emotional knowledge can be identified and established in both forums; d) if so, what are the linguistic resources mobilized by groups members to assert and claim their knowledge.