

To Thine Own Self Be True: Alcoholics Anonymous, Recovery and Care of the Self

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Background

- Empirical research has so far been focused on the mature adult experience
- Increased use of AA and 12-Step fellowships
- Small but increasing number of studies looking at the personal experience of recovery
- How do young adults *experience* the process of recovery from alcohol use disorder in 12-Step fellowships?

Method

- Eighteen young men (22-35 years old)
- Data collection: semi-structured interviews & autobiographies
- Data analysis: interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

...a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2009, p. 1).

12 Steps of AA

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

12 Steps of AA

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

AA Traditions

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority - a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.
3. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
4. The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.
5. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.
6. Each group has but one primary purpose-to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
7. An AA group ought never endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

AA Traditions

8. Every AA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
9. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
10. AA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve
11. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
12. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.
13. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

The Spiritual Discourse of AA

- AA emphasises the spiritual dimension of alcoholism (addiction)
 - ‘We Agnostics’ chapter - alcoholism “is an illness which only a spiritual experience will conquer.” (p. 44)
- Practical wisdom (e.g. slogans)
- Temporality of the now
- Recovery habits (consistent with William James’ habit formation)
- The paradox of surrender (Gregory Bateson’s double-bind)
- Serenity prayer: God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference (Reinhold Niebuhr)

AA & Contemporary Spirituality

- Oxford Group
- Carl Jung
- William James (conversion experiences – ego collapse)
- Hybrid phenomenon of contemporary spirituality (e.g. Mariana Valverde)

Psychological Research - 12 Step Programmes

Recovery narratives

Identity project

Group therapy & self-help dynamics

Social compensation

Early Recovery

Care of the self

I take better care of myself, I care about my surroundings, simple things like I have a shower every day, I brush my teeth twice a day, I make sure that I eat three meals a day, I pay my bills, yeah I'm paying my bills, I'm not just letting all the letters pile up. I actually open them now and read them...I feel a lot more alive and healthy and I listen to my body more as well you know, when I'm tired I think right okay I'm going to sleep before I fight it you know.

- *James*

Middle recovery

Self and others

I want to keep knowing myself and have good relationships. I now really value my relationships. They are the most important thing in my life.

- *Sean*

I think all my relationships are sort of changing...I started to reevaluate my relationships with people in a lot of ways and look at the reasons, not necessarily with family but the reasons why I might be friends with such person or why, why I'm feeling, why I'm feeling, how do I do, it's sort of like I've just got a new perspective on things really.

- *Henry*

Long-term recovery

Towards a balanced self & masculinity

I believe in being loving and really understand that when someone asks me to help them, it's a commitment to pass on my experience with love.

- *Mark*

I would like to see myself as useful to others...would like to learn to be more free from fear and to learn to love more.

- *Danny*

I want to develop spiritually as well I want to lay a portion of each day aside to focus on that because I do feel better when I take the time out to think you know, to think and try to give more importance to that.

- *James*

Recovery

It is a nice thing to do writing you know, writing just about things, like getting stoned and driving, I did drunk-driving a couple of times. But you know it only takes one accident to fuck up and ruin someone else's life...To write questions like, in what ways have you tried to control your addiction...it's just not nice to admit those sorts of things, it's helpful in terms of working the program, but it's not, it's not very pleasant to have to write it down. It brings a lot of stuff.

-Tom

I went to a cathedral, in fact I got on my knees and I just said a prayer of gratitude and a prayer of thanks and I just said please protect the ones I love from harm and pain...it's a weird thing I don't know I used to shudder when I heard other people use a prayer, it's the experience of that, it's a beautiful thing really. It's just getting in touch with a higher conscience...It's trying to sort of hear the words, speaking out loud the words that are personal and getting them out there, I can't put it into words really it's, it carries a power you know, dishonesty if I'm aware of being dishonest I'll try to stop basically remove this defect of character and normally it works it's gone...it takes the power away from the problems for now you know.

- Dan

Spirituality

I think recovery for me is it's about developing a spiritual dimension in my life. I pray, I talk to God in my head and stuff like that and sometimes I do get down on my knees and pray but you know, you know I just sometimes, I just think what the fuck am I doing you know, and other times I do feel that sort of connection to like an energy and a power greater than me you know and sometimes I feel decidedly unspiritual you know, really I don't know. I think part of me you know, part of me is a Buddhist sat on a mat meditating, drinking herbal tea and thinking you know that's it I've done it, the shaved head, but I know that's not me and I don't think the spiritual dimension will take that shape or form in me. I think spirituality for me is more about sitting down and relaxing you know, and taking that time and thinking about my day and what I could have done better the way I treated people, could I have treated people differently, would I have liked to be treated the way I treat other people and I think that's for me you know a big part of, a big part of the way I want to live my life.

- James

Selves

There's always the positive side and negative side to things. I believe I had this negative and unhealthy side, which is my addiction. But I also believe there's a nice part of me, a loving part of me, a caring part of me, a compassionate part of me, understanding part of me, which is all based in love. That part wants the good for me and other people. That's the spiritual side of me. I've learnt to listen to this side rather than just let myself be overpowered by the negative side. It's quite hard to define but I know I can feel it. Sometimes I just need to give myself some time and just hold on. Sometimes I can go deeper and sometimes I back off for a bit. I pray to a God of my own understanding, which I sometimes don't understand. I just feel it and it's alright and it works.

- Sean

Discussion

- AA's pragmatic orientation towards recovery seems to enable in some *care of the self* as an ontological orientation.
- The religious-spiritual discourse gives prominence to the development of a 'discipline'; a set of practices and that trains participants in their capacities of self-reflection and self-regulation (i.e. writing, praying).
- The focus on 'recovery habits' is consonant with both John Dewey's and William James' conception of habit as the basis of behaviour.

Self-Care vs Care of the Self (Foucault)

- Self-care (Technologies of the Self): the rise of medical (wellbeing) technologies (How to be a good Self)
- Care of the Self (The Hermeneutics of the Subject): The care of the self is the ethical transformation of the self in light of the truth, which is to say the transformation of the self into a truthful existence (Murray, 2007). (How to live a good life)
- ‘Know thyself’ – how can we know ourselves? How can we come to know the self itself?

To Thine Own Self Be True

'To thine own self be true' – True stands for 'beneficial'

Authenticity (truthfulness): how well we know ourselves and are aware of our inner states.

