

AA Members Understandings of the Higher Power (HP)

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to research how AA members understood the Higher Power (HP). The question of its place in recovery from alcoholism was addressed. The analysis of 10 recorded one-hour interviews led to argue that the Higher Power is not only central to sobriety but also to the well-being of AA members whatever their original or current declared spiritual or religious beliefs may be. Their experiential relationship with it gives a new meaning to their life which goes beyond their sense of identity. The centrality of the HP in AA seems to rub off on its members so that by practicing the program they act more and more like believers in their lives. The main understanding of the HP is Love.

Introduction

“Alcoholics Anonymous has been called the most significant phenomenon in the history of ideas in the twentieth century” [1]. “Alcoholism has often been referred to as a ‘spiritual disease’, especially within the context of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA in this respect, offers a spiritual path to recovery from alcohol use disorders” [2].

Academically, AA is considered as just one of a number of recovery paths open to alcoholics. It can be disconcerting when seeing AA principles at work in rehab centres and in AA meetings. Something about the AA program seems to elude conventional analysts. Nevertheless, it is not original to deplore the failure of many to understand the AA program [3]. Addiction workers have been known to become “disenchanted” with the dominant orthodoxies of that field [4].

“Misconceptions about Alcoholics Anonymous... abound.” [5]. However, “Recent interpretations of [professionals]... show that the AA recovery program is... implicitly grounded in sound psychological principles” [6]. Looking back on AA’s origins sheds light on its present workings. A couple of influences dominate, both involving spirituality:

Carl Jung’s, the psychoanalyst interested in spiritual matters, and that of a Christian fundamentalist group known as “the Oxford group” [7].

Carl Jung, the son of a Lutheran pastor and a spiritualist mother, Jung had a lifelong interest in the effect that religion has on people” [8]. Rowland Hazard, a client he had treated for alcoholism, came back to him after relapsing. Jung told him that, having already received the best medical treatment possible, he couldn’t get any more, but that one thing might help relieve his desire to drink: having a spiritual or religious experience. Jung’s refusal to take Hazard on again as a patient and his advice to try religion instead is known to have marked the demise of classical medicine in the treatment of alcoholism, having “added professional legitimacy to the transformative power of spiritual experience” [5].

It is when Hazard sought religion with the Oxford Group in Akron, Ohio and, with it, found sobriety. He testified to other alcoholics about his transformed life through faith in the Christian God. After Ebby Wachter converted through hearing him, he in turn brought the message to an old alcoholic friend, the agnostic Bill Wilson. Bill W, as he became known in AA, doubted for a while, but then also had a spiritual experience resulting in sobriety. He went on to found AA with another alcoholic who had sobered up in the Oxford Group [5]. “Experiential knowledge” – not professional credentials – was considered as the real expertise in AA [9], with the passing on of spiritual experience.

Through AA’s methods “seem to sidestep scientific and medical

findings altogether” [10], it remains a model in addiction treatment. The impact of its program on the treatment of addictions is particularly remarkable in the area of spirituality, which it deems central to recovery from alcoholism [11]. It pushes addiction medicine to recognize spirituality as an important factor in recovery, which is unprecedented. Miller even argues that due to it, the field of addiction is actually ahead of the rest of western medicine.

At its core is the condition attached to AA promises of recovery: “Follow the dictates of a Higher Power and you will presently live in a new and wonderful world, no matter what your present circumstances [12].”

Definitions

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is defined in the Webster College Dictionary (2010) [13] as “an international fellowship of alcoholics whose purpose is to stay sober and help others recover from alcoholism”. It is also the title of AA’s main book, nicknamed ‘the Big Book’, containing instructions on how to acquire sobriety and stories of original AA members.

Alcoholism is defined by AA as a chronic physical, mental and spiritual illness, “a progressive illness, which can never be cured but which, like some other diseases, can be arrested” [14].

Higher Power

The Twelve-Step Program is “a program... designed especially to help an individual overcome an addiction... by adherence to 12 steps emphasizing personal growth and dependence on a higher spiritual being” [16]. Borkman concluded that, “the voluntary association works best with and is informed by the research on self-help/mutual aid” (2008 p.12).

Prayer has had many different definitions. A simple one is “Prayer is, at root, simply paying attention to God” [17].

Literature review

AA literature: Because the illness of alcohol dependence is said to involve all aspects of the person, physical sobriety is only the surface goal of the program. The Alcoholics Anonymous book states that drinking is just symptom of a malady in a physically, mentally and spiritually sick person, “the body of the alcoholic is quite as abnormal as his mind” [18].

Within that perspective, AA is unique [6]. Its original qualities include: sometimes mandated (as alternative to jail or to losing job); sometimes strongly rejected for its spirituality; strong influence on all other areas of addiction recovery (overeating, sex, etc.); unprecedented impact on addiction treatment; apparent paradox within: “shared vulnerability, not shared strength, binds members together, and is believed by some to be the key to recovery in AA” [20,21]. Importantly, AA is the only organization that offers a free follow-up for life to its members; no other treatment organization, whether private or governmental, can afford to give such continuous support [22]. Finally, researchers agree about the importance of “contact with God, humility, prayer and meditation; taking personal inventory or serving others” [20,2].

Sobriety is referred to as a “gift” received in consequence of “working the program”. Further along comes more: “the short-term goals are to attain and maintain sobriety. The long term goals are to live a life of joy and happiness, of purpose and meaning”. That is a tall order, way beyond what the non-alcoholic general population envisions. AA might have discovered, or reframed, some laws that everyone could benefit from.

The importance attributed to the HP is seen by some as the main

Many references to God are found in the AA Big Book as well as in the ‘Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions’, aka ‘12 & 12’ AA book. These books present an expectation that the more AA members mature, the more spiritual they will be. “When we developed still more, we discovered the best possible source of emotional stability to be God Himself.” [19].

The Big Book does not try to avoid the subject with atheists and agnostics: “if an alcoholic failed to perfect... his spiritual life..., he could not survive” [19]. An entire chapter, “We Agnostics” (2001, Chapter 4), is devoted to them. It concludes that a change of ideas is necessary. “Our ideas did not work. But the God idea did” (p.52), fitting well with Jung’s suggestion that if medicine did not work for Hazard, God might. Though gentle in its approach, that AA chapter does not mince its words, “Our human resources... failed utterly. Lack of power was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be *Power greater than ourselves.*” (p.45)

The expression *Higher Power*, first coined by Alcoholics Anonymous, was subsequently taken on by all other twelve-step programs that followed, simply defined as “a power greater than ourselves” (Step 2), opening the door to those who have no religious or spiritual beliefs. New members are encouraged to see the HP as any power that they choose to consider as higher than themselves. Various concepts are adopted by people. However, a criterion often referred to as essential to a HP in the 12 steps program, *loving and caring*, does not apply to all concepts. For example the Universe chosen by some as a HP does not include love and care.

One reason found in the Big Book for the centrality of the HP in AA is that Alcoholics are an extreme example of “self run riot”, being their own God. Directing their own lives leads them to “insanity”, hence the need to find another guide in life, another God than self.

Academic researchers are currently two academic definitions of AA: a religious sect (with all the negative implications of the term) and a voluntary self-help organization. The qualification of religious sect coming from a materialistic world view has led to skewed interpretations. “Current AA researchers... whose secular framework cannot easily accommodate non-scientific paradigms often parody, trivialize, or stigmatize AA” [6]. Having considered both perspectives,

Power, who he sometimes calls God. ree participants shared such

upbringing. There's a lot of saying of prayers and not really thinking about what they mean, and that's still a habit."

Three participants reported that in desperate times simple prayers were insufficient. Carl, distraught, went through a time of intense prayer that led him to a shift in his relationship with the HP, making it more real, intense and satisfying:

"...not knowing whether I was gonna see her again. And then I was distraught... But then I had to pray and meditate, pray and meditate. And it... then you know through whatever happened... So it all made clearly this connection with my HP bigger."

Lily described feeling like a spectator to prayer, observing people in meetings, and reading about it. She wanted to learn more about it and tried to reason her way into a closer relationship with the Higher Power.

"I know people that feel held. They've got a sort of personal God, a personal HP, say they feel loved by their HP. These people talk about their strong connection; and I'm thinking: I know I've healed. I've got my tools, but they've got this relationship! What's that? I need to work a

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about stu and always have kind of a fear of death, an obsession with “I’m looking a er myself. And this is where God is doing something it, just fear. And it takes away that fear because it’s ok, you’re looking at me that I couldn’t do for myself. Le to my own devices, this would a er.” (Emma) not be happening.” (Alex)

Whatever the interviewees’ idea of a HP was, and whether they “...I’ve lived with an illness that wants to feed in the doom and considered themselves as atheists or believers, they all prayed together, negativity; now I need this power to know that it’s gonna be ok at least together, set prayers in meetings and sometimes by themselves. When these automatic negative thoughts come up. I’ve got this power All expressed at least some gratitude. Some handed over their care to say no.” (Carl) and some felt a connection. All told of interventions of the HP or of “Something” in their lives. ey may have noticed those interventions “I think that my HP wants for me what I want for my children on in what some might call coincidences, in some mysterious protection, a good day. So I try to treat myself the way my HP would treat me; in or in the fact that they’ve remained sober even through difficult times, my everyday life what that means is that I do things that I didn’t use which ve interviewees said was miraculous. (Table 1) to do when I was drinking. I am not gonna sound very revolutionary but I eat at meal times, don’t skip meals, get enough rest, and exercise

eme 3: Higher power impact: at theme arose in response to the question asked about the influence of the HP on the participants’ lives. ere was “I have healthy food, and I don’t drink ca eine because it doesn’t suit me.” (Alex) *Impact on Relationships, Impact on Work, Impact on Health and During problems.* Attendance at meetings is perceived as an important part of taking care of oneself.

From *Impact on Relationships*, 3 subthemes were extracted: with Self (including categories *Sobriety, Looking a er one’s needs*, and *Trust in Future*); with HP (including *Shi and Program*);

and with Others (including *Relationships and Work*).

he rst category of impact on Self is that of *Sobriety*, emphasised by most interviewees. e HP is behind the ‘miracle of sobriety’, as Liz calls it. ere was a “I pretty much go to a meeting a day anyway, so I have that level of reinforcement... on a daily basis.” (John).

“...HP intervention for me to stop drinking!” (Liz). “I guess that’s another aspect of how the rooms work because ultimately we’re all in the rooms because we’re awed, we’ve all done bad things, and it’s that that does level pride, that does make us all of the same level.” (Emma)

“I couldn’t stay sober by myself” (Alex). “...it’s just this, they call it a hole in the soul in meetings, and I love being with people who feel like that; it makes me feel like I’m not the only one, it normalises it, it comforts me a lot to be around other people who feel that way.” (Lily)

“...gives boundaries, which are needed otherwise I would drink if things were made too easy” (Emma). “Team work gives hope and faith.” (Fred)

he category of *Looking a er one’s needs* is seen as consequence of having a HP: “My perception of the HP has changed in the rooms... Listening to people has liberated me from dark Catholicism” (Emma).

	HP views	Shift	Practices	Contentment
Alex	Indescribable, Larger and larger enlargement, Good	Every 5 years, new concept of God	Meditation Steps, Meetings Strategies	Much higher, Stability, Program works
Carl.	Unconditional Love	Loved one dying, desperate prayer: close relationship with, new HP	Simple prayer Thanks giving Meditation Contact in nature	After 18 years in AA, found new HP : Love Wonderful
Emma.	Unconditional Acceptance In the sky Looking out for me	Two Catholic events led to rejection of religiosity: liberation religiosity: liberation	Handing over Daily readings Meetings, sponsor Acceptance	Wonderful, Trust in HP taking care of her makes life easier
Fred.	Nature, Personal Conscience Meetings	After relapse, saw couldn’t make it alone: embraced AA	Prayer for sobriety	

“Opening up instead of keeping plan secret kept me sober... Going to meetings, getting support, and talking about temptation, prevents it building up... I pick up pointers in meetings. Sharing at meetings makes me feel stronger.” (Fred)

Trust in the future is a category that represented a new vision for the majority of participants.

“I used to worry a lot and always have a fear of death, a bit of an obsession with it, just fear. It takes away that fear because it’s like: It’s ok, you’re looked after.” (Emma).

“I feel like it’s just the beginning. It’s almost like waking up... from getting sober till now. Slow process. And I realise that now I’m at the place of healing the mental illness part of the disease; the physical addiction, the compulsion has been healed.” (Liz)

“...I’ve changed and now I’ve got back faith that everything is gonna be ok, no matter what, it’s gonna be alright.” (Carl)

The subtheme of Relationship with HP was related as important to eight interviewees.

Four participants said that their new unconditionally loving HP helped them to value themselves and to reinterpret life events.

“...it’s very comforting in that there is this idea of what God wants you to be. If God – HP – has a plan for you... if we kind of listen out to what the HP is telling us, we’re gonna get on the right track. It is kind of reassuring, that what is for me is not gonna go past me that it’s there but I just need to kind of be aware.” (Emma)

“I came through that experience with a stronger, deep connection to my understanding of what that power is, what my God is, He’s unconditional love... Because my HP loves me unconditionally, I’ve learned to love myself... I’m loved, you know, I’m enough, I’m ok.” (Carl)

“Having a HP can relieve stress.” (Liz)

Emma and Liz noted that handing over enabled humility.

“It’s humility as well because even when you feel really bad about yourself you’re usually self-important, so... taking that you’re not actually that important – not in a bad way but just in a way that’s easier to live with... just hand it over!” (Emma)

“The HP is important because it makes me more humble. It rightsizes me... I would think that I was better than everyone and I knew more than everyone and... it’s just not like that anymore at all.” (Liz)

“...gives the right perspective of self as even feeling bad about oneself comes from self-importance... there is no guilt”. (Emma)

After three years in AA, Liz said she was still in the process of remembering the HP and thought it would last a life time for whoever sets up to learn it.

“Practicing remembering the HP is like learning a second language. It becomes more natural with time.” (Liz)

The category of *Shi* had happened at some point to everybody only from active alcoholism to sobriety. But four in particular related a *shi* which gave them a close contact with their HP.

When Carl, distraught by the imminent death of a loved one, prayed desperately, he felt for the first time in his life the HP’s presence which reassured him. It gave him a calmness, trust and faith for future tough situations. It is marked a *shi* in him. He, who had remained an agnostic in AA for 18 years, now experienced a

“...new peace because of faith in the HP... Being unconditionally loved... I’m good enough”.

Liz and Gabe related a chain of events to the HP, saying:

“My low point was my turning point.” (Liz)

“My first awakening... moments of clarity... it was like someone shooting a diamond bullet in my head. Just sitting at home, I was suffering a great deal with... losing someone and I had to look at myself, my part in causing the suffering and something made me accept some of my shortcomings. It gave me a warm feeling... a vision... It’s a great irony that something I didn’t want to look at – didn’t want to acknowledge my shortcomings at all in life – when I did, I was rewarded with... a vision with feelings... exciting!” (Gabe)

These *shis* enabled participants to see the bigger picture; six of them related seeing the good out of bad situations. In spite of pain, there were moments of trust. Good came out of a bad situation. In fact if it hadn’t been for the past bad situation, things would not be as good now.

“With the HP, things will be alright in the end. If things are not alright, it’s not the end” (Liz)

“God telling me to slow down... hearing God’s message turned a negative into a positive”. (Fred)

“It makes it possible to see a bad event as what was meant to be knowing there is a bigger plan... It feels nicer that way, more connected. Things feel more connected, I like it... I feel more connected to the universe and the bigger thing. Yea and things... seem to have more purpose.” (Liz)

Applying the category *Program* had positive consequences in the lives of all participants

Gabe quoted AA’s promise ‘We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it’, as his outlook had changed. Sobriety and belief in a HP as benevolent force enabled him to see a great range of skills an experience in his CV, where he used to see catastrophes. He is now

“...comfortable looking back.”

Sponsors advise to do a nightly list of things one is grateful for.

“I just wanted life to end, and I don’t have... one of the things that I try and do is a gratitude list which I share with other people and certainly from a mental health kind of perspective I was not grateful for anything at the end of my drinking, now I’m grateful for everything really.” (Gabe)

In the subtheme of Impact on Relationships with others, 7 interviewees reported a change. Carl and Emma said they had the ability to love with others because their new HP was loving and accepting.

“It’s given me an ability to love... So... because my HP loves me unconditionally, I’ve learned to love myself. I know there’s something out there loving me, unconditional, no matter what I do, that this thing is gonna love me. And that’s where my recovery’s been *shied*” (Carl)

“Because I’ve got this HP who says, ‘Listen, if you’re trying to be a good person and if you’re not intentionally screwing people over, including yourself, then I am happy’, it affects me in the kind of person I’m trying to be and the kind of teacher I’m trying to be, just kind of loving and accepting of others – not with the spiteful list of what I want them to be like – loving their laws, loving people’s laws, loving.” (Emma)

When Liz noticed that she felt inferior, she avoided her old pattern of being nasty. Discussion

The purpose of that research was to find how AA members' understandings of a HP impacted them. The AA literature talks about "I start to feel less than, because I know that my disposition is then to not be very nice, I can remove myself, think, perhaps God as we understood Him." (AA, Step 3 and 11), leaving up to each member to interpret God as they wish, the expression Higher Power lesson is actually: 'Just an imagining.' It's not real." giving even more freedom of choice. It would be useful to find out whether different choices led to different outcomes.

Gabe reported learning to have good relationships:

The research question was: How do AA members understand relationships? "...it has no doubt affected my relationships... I've learned by it. So that's where I'm trying to learn now is to have good relationships with people. You can still be talkative and friendly but know where the boundaries are. When... the first 42 years of my life I didn't have any boundaries..."

"I don't even appreciate sarcasm in the way that I used to. I'm much different... much calmer, I'm less frenetic... they used to call me like a bumble bee on speed... I smile a lot more, yea so yea, relationships are totally different. Yea, thank God!" (Liz)

"I can take care of myself so that I can be available to people. I couldn't do that, having to take care of myself. So I wasn't really, I'd be in a hurry or under pressure or feeling stressed or angry." (Alex)

In the subtheme of Impact on Work we people related how they had changed. Alex was able to handle the thought of tasks that used to overwhelm him. Annie was satisfied in being self-employed after having been in a highly pressured post. Dom had left his very stressful job for a better one. Though there was still pressure there, morning meditation and prayer made it ok.

"...I changed. The job that I did... I thought I had to have the perception of being ruthless and calculating. I thought I had to be cunning and calculating... but I saw things through a negative perspective. And I changed a lot now..." (Gabe)

"the knowledge that it requires work to be happy – it's not an entitlement – or contented, or whatever the goal is, is definitely a new thing for me." (John) (Table 2).

name of Love, still seems central to the AA program. In the interviews, the closer participants' understanding of the HP was to Love, the more contented they seemed to be with their lives (Table 1).

A note about the context of this research: unlike the US, England is quite a humanist secular society. It is not surprising to have found the idea of God strongly rejected by some AA members. However it is worth noting that AA with its HP concept gives them the ability to progress at their own pace as they "come to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity" (Step 2) [61-73].

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