

Social Psychology of Alcoholics Anonymous

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Alcoholics Anonymous is an organization dedicated to assisting its members stay sober as well as assisting other alcoholics in achieving sobriety (The AA Grapevine, Inc., 2004). The organization attempts to put an end to two specific behaviors: 1) drinking and 2) frequenting pro-alcohol environments. This paper's goal is to explain the social psychological processes that underlie the client's behaviors targeted for change, the program's social psychological practices for changing the target behavior, and finally to make recommendations to improve the efficacy of the program.

Social Psychological Processes

There are many social psychological processes that underlie drinking and the frequenting of alcohol-friendly locations. The processes/concepts include *conformity*, *group norms*, and *gender and cultural influences*. The first, conformity, plays a role in the use of alcohol in three ways. First, individuals may choose to drink simply because everyone else is doing it. If an individual finds himself in this particular situation frequently, it can lead to serious problems including alcoholism. Second and only slightly different from the first, people may choose to use alcohol as a means to fit-in. This differs from the first in that here the individual feels an internal drive to drink so as not to stand out from the group. Finally, peer pressure may result in an individual developing severely debilitating alcohol-related problems, again, including alcohol addiction.

A second social psychological concept underlying why people may use alcohol is group norms. For certain groups, it may be commonplace for its members to drink alcohol regularly. An example might be a group of friends who frequently go to restaurants or bars together and drink alcohol. Typically, these individuals are social drinkers. However, the potential exists for one or more of the group to develop an alcohol addiction. Another example of a group norm

related to alcohol use is the family that every night sits down and has a beer or two or three with dinner. This is what is done in this particular family and undoubtedly, someone will develop an addiction if they have not already.

Gender and cultural differences also have a role in the use of alcohol. Typically, men are expected to drink alcohol in casual, social, and often business settings. Further, certain cultures are more likely to use and possibly abuse alcohol more regularly than other cultures. Further still, it is often frowned upon if individuals admit to not being able to “hold their liquor.” This often results in individuals not seeking intervention when a problem develops.

To address and “treat” the issue of alcoholism, Alcoholics Anonymous utilizes a 12-step program. The 12-step program is a prescriptive program that brings about a change in the individual by providing some tools for dealing and living with alcoholism. Most of these tools are social psychological processes. The 12 steps can be combined into four overarching categories. However, the steps for each category may not be contiguous. The first category includes steps that appeal to a higher power. This higher power may take the form of God, the Creator, the sponsor, or another form/concept (Thomassen, 2002; “Working the”, 2004). Regarding the sponsor, “at first this higher power is likely to be our closest AA friend, our sponsor, who points out that coming to meetings is a good beginning but a far cry from a contented useful life (“Working the”, 2004, para. 27).

The second encompassing category includes those steps that prescribe “public” confessions. “Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a Program of Recovery....5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs (The Big Book, 2004, p. 59). These confessions take the form of a personal narrative or “drunk-alogue” (Jensen, 2000; Mueller, 2003).

A third category includes steps dealing with redemption. These steps prescribe appealing to God for cleansing and making plans to amend wrongs done to others in the past. The steps incorporating the fourth category are designed to culminate in a spiritual awakening.

Supplemental to the 12-steps are the 12-traditions. These twelve traditions are socially-based and can likewise be broken down into categories. The first category refers to traditions that promote the greater good. The second and third categories concern the group conscience and open membership, respectively. Other categories include traditions related to one collective purpose, to the group's autonomy and sovereignty, and finally, the anonymity of the group.

Behavior Change

Combined, the 12-steps and 12-traditions bring about change in many alcoholics' behavior. The social psychological processes involved are in many ways similar to other organizations concerned with bringing about ideological change in individuals. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous invokes social psychological techniques or strategies to initiate psychological processes necessary to influence their members. These processes can be seen, albeit on a much higher level and scale, in authoritarian political regimes, political activist organizations, and religions, including cults.

Walsh (2001) outlines the techniques used by many cults to *brainwash* their members. These include *milieu control* in which communications to and from the outside world are controlled by the group leader and *mystical manipulation* whereby the leader uses "extensive personal manipulation" to elicit desired behaviors, including dependency (p. 122). Alcoholics Anonymous attempts to bring about behavioral change by using its main text, the "Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous," as its Gospel, and promoting dependence on one's sponsor and/or group. *Demand for purity*, another control technique, divides the world into good and evil as defined by the

group itself. Here, Alcoholics Anonymous does not necessarily fit the profile. Still, this technique will appear again later. Additional techniques include the *sacred science* where members are taught that deeper understanding comes from extensive training and unquestioning of group doctrine and *loading the language* where new meanings of terminology are established to suit the goals of the group. Alcoholics Anonymous strongly encourages members to meditate on the twelve steps in search for deeper understanding and ultimately a spiritual awakening. Their use of loaded language can be seen in terminology such as *sane ideals, flaws which block us, turnarounds, assets, higher power*, etc. Certainly, no one is accusing Alcoholics Anonymous of being a cult. However, they do use some of the same persuasive techniques on a much smaller and less intense scale. Continuing with the cult analogy—just as research suggests that cult members are often chosen because of the ease in which they submit to religious indoctrination (Coney, 2003), it is plausible that Alcoholics Anonymous has found in alcoholics who have hit rock-bottom, the perfect receptacles for their brand of indoctrination.

One major social psychological process used by Alcoholics Anonymous is the process of conformity. Conformity involves the changing of personal beliefs to agree with the group. A consequence of this is ‘groupthink.’ Groupthink can lead to “...excessive optimism and excessive risk taking, presumptions of the group’s morality....and intolerance of challenges by a group member to shared key beliefs” (Hudson, 1999, p. 35). A popular phrase of Alcoholics Anonymous is “fake it ‘til you make it.” This refers specifically to the issue of conformity. Additionally, there are characteristics of both the individual and the group that contribute to the potential conformity to Alcoholics Anonymous expectations. Alcoholics typically have low self-esteem and self-worth issues. This makes them more likely to conform to group norms. From the

Alcoholics Anonymous group angle, new members are likely to conform if other members are similar to themselves and there is strong group cohesiveness.

Alcoholics Anonymous also seeks behavioral change through a change of attitudes. The hope for long-term behavioral change in relation to alcoholism is first achieved by changing immediate behaviors. Chief among these immediate changes is that of the member's old social network for a new network consisting of individuals (including the sponsor) who support the member's desired behavioral change (Thomassen, 2002; Kaskutas, Bond, & Humphreys, 2002). This immediate behavior change, along with a push for unwavering acceptance of the group's "teachings," combine with the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance to remove most hesitations and concerns the individual may have initially had.

A powerful social psychological process utilized by Alcoholics Anonymous is that of persuasion. The power of persuasion rests almost solely in the personal narrative. To begin with, when a new member attends a meeting, he sees someone who has been through similar experiences and has seemingly overcome them talking about those experiences openly to many people. This person becomes like an expert to the new member. Another powerful aspect of Alcoholics Anonymous' persuasion is its fear-based arguments. Based on the "Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous" (2004), individuals who are not successful in the program, for whatever reason, are chided as inferior and incapable of honesty:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which

demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest. (p. 59)

The message that the program works is an extremely persuasive message in and of itself because of the way it is disseminated to the membership. Each time a different person gives their story, the message repeats. Each time a new person speaks, stories of where I was, what happened, where I am now reinforce the message (Jensen, 2000). Invariably the *now* has progressed beyond the *was*. This continuous repetition of the message results in over-learning of the message. The fact that the message is delivered face-to-face gives power to its persuasiveness.

The final social psychological process by which the program attempts to promote lasting change is through responses to social influence. There are three categories of responses to social influence: *compliance*, *identification*, and *internalization*. By helping the new member to refrain from alcohol-related problems, Alcoholics Anonymous hopes to obtain the members compliance with the twelve steps. As the new member attends meetings and observes older members and his sponsor the individual begins to want be where he perceives the others as being...he wants to reach their level of progression. The member may begin to participate in the bureaucratic functioning of the group as a means of identifying more those he aspires to be like (Thomassen, 2002). Finally, through the process of internalization, the new member will find intrinsic motivation to make and maintain lasting change.

Recommendations

History has shown Alcoholics Anonymous to be extremely successful at accomplishing their stated goal of sustained behavior change for their members. Still, there is room for improvement.

If it is determined that the ends should justify the means, then there are several concepts Alcoholics Anonymous could borrow from more extreme groups. They could better use milieu control by incorporating stricter rules concerning with whom members should and should not associate. Sponsors could also take advantage of the special relationship between sponsor and new member and make a systematic attempt at manipulation to achieve the desired results. Further, a greater demand for purity could be melded into the twelve-step program. All of these possible avenues of action are malignant and most likely unacceptable to Alcoholics Anonymous, as they should be.

A more plausible and acceptable approach is addressing the self-serving bias and fundamental attribution error that permeates throughout the twelve steps. By requiring members to admit they are powerless and that only a higher power can restore them, Alcoholics Anonymous is encouraging their membership to shirk responsibility for their own future and to deny responsibility for their past. A better, more socially responsible approach would be to incorporate a sense of joint responsibility between the individual and their higher power. In addition, the requirement of the first step to admit one is powerless is a major step. If a member cannot accept this requisite, they will become fixated and ultimately fail. New members may benefit from the foot-in-the-door phenomenon if the first step was not so demanding. Finally, the entire program seems to stem from an external locus of control. While the ultimate goal appears to be a switching from external to internal locus of control, the path (i.e. the steps) do not necessarily lead there. Including more internal locus of control developing strategies in the steps may help members actually achieve the twelfth step—spiritual awakening.

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