



Alcoholics Anonymous: New Directions in Research on Spirituality and Recovery

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INTRODUCTION

Alcoholics Anonymous: New Directions in Research on Spirituality and Recovery

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Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) provides an experience of fulfillment and life-saving recovery for its committed members. For the research community, however, it serves as an example of how social and spiritual forces are orchestrated to achieve changes in cognition and behavior. We undertook organizing the material provided here as an emerging body of research and clinical science that sheds light on this process of change and redemption.

This series of articles grew out of a meeting that we chaired in March 2013 that brought together a multidisciplinary group of experts to provide a perspective on AA and its spiritual orientation. No such broad-based initiative on AA had been carried out before. This collaboration was a component of a project we undertook with support from the John Templeton Foundation to develop a scientific perspective on the way spirituality can play a role in the improvement of health and well-being.

This current body of research findings begins with two overview articles that we prepared to frame this publication. The first, by Marc Galanter, deals with an approach to applying diverse scientific perspectives to understanding AA's function. It draws on cognitive psychology, neuroscience, social psy-

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chology, and sociology to explicate the experience of the individual and the structure of the fellowship itself. The second article, by Stephen Post, is an exposition on the spiritual nature of AA, focusing on the triadic community of God, neighbor, and self, an important aspect of theo-philosophy. His article points out that AA has served, in effect, as an experiment in human fulfillment mediated through this triadic community.

Subsequent to this, we include two articles that introduce an anthropologic perspective on AA and its attendant spirituality to illuminate the fellowship's function on the basis of culturally based models. The first of these, by Lindsay Bond and Thomas Csordas, deals with an issue often raised relative to the concept of "powerlessness" in AA, and the need to reconcile this with an active role for women, from a feminist perspective. It points to a paradox often cited as needing clarification: AA engagement relative to individual autonomy. The next article, by Joseph Westermeyer, draws on anthropologic models of intimate social networks, altruism, positive self-identity, and reacculturation. Dr. Westermeyer thereby seeks to utilize these diverse dimensions related to spirituality and culture.

This is followed by a physiologically grounded perspective by Gregory Fricchione, which describes how the biological substrates of separation and attachment are "hijacked" by substances, and how they can then be renewed by the spiritual orientation of 12-Step programs. In particular, Fricchione focuses on how substance abuse distorts separation–attachment circuitries.

Two subsequent articles reflect different perspectives on the psychology of AA. The first, by Helen Dermatis and Susan Egelko, explores the convergence of the AA model on cognitive-behavioral issues inherent in a Buddhist orientation toward mindfulness and meditation. These issues reflect a recent broadening of the experience of recovery in AA for many adherents. The second, by George Vaillant, deals with the relationship between AA and a contemporary view of positive psychology, and this discipline's physiologic underpinnings. He illustrates the issue relative to its bearing on specific steps from the 12-Step model itself.

Clinical issues are then addressed in three articles. The first, by Edward Khantzian, draws on psychodynamic psychology to explain how a compromise in self-regulation is corrected within the AA experience, with illustration by clinical example. He draws on a thoroughgoing understanding of the way psychoanalytic precepts can illuminate our understanding of the AA experience. The second, by John Fromson and Riva Shah, describes the application of the AA model in the reparative experience of physicians with addictions moving toward long-term recovery. It reflects Fromson's extensive experience with the Committee on Physician Health for health professionals with addictions. Jolene Sanders and colleagues then bring us a gendered perspective on the diversity of spiritual experience of AA members.

A final section includes three studies of diverse focus on psychometric research. The first article, by Matthew Lee, Paige Veta, Byron Johnson, and

Maria Pagano shows how the daily spiritual experiences of a cohort of adolescents in a court-remanded treatment program impacts on their likelihood of abstinence, increased prosocial behaviors, and reduced narcissistic behaviors. This is of particular interest because the participants were troubled adolescents, often thought to be refractory to acquiring a spiritual orientation. The second article, by John Kelly and M. Claire Greene, reviews theory and research related to understanding of the mechanisms through which AA aids in recovery. Dr. Kelly's systematic investigations in this area have been influential in providing an explanation for how AA "works." The last of these articles, by Marc Galanter, Helen Dermatis, and Cristal Sampson, provides an empirically grounded perspective on the nature of spiritual awakening in AA, based on responses of long-term AA members to a psychometrically based survey instrument. This is salient because the experience of this awakening has been found to be associated with greatly decreased craving for alcohol and stabilization of abstinence.

Clearly, more research and related explanation will be needed to further build on our understanding of this remarkable, spiritually grounded fellowship, but we see the current effort as one contribution to this ongoing process.