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Alcoholics Anonymous as a Social Movement

Robin Room
Addiction Research Foundation
33 Russell Street
Toronto, Ontario
M5S 2S1
Canada

Abstract

As a mutual-help movement without aspirations to societal change, Alcoholics Anonymous falls outside the boundaries of most sociological discussions of social movements. AA is a pervasive presence in North America; survey data suggests that AA's own membership claims are understated. Its main principles of organization -- openness of membership, the group as the autonomous organizational base; no affiliations or distractions, and internal equality and democracy -- draw on previous American models, although they are strengthened by unusual features such as the principled avoidance of organizational property ownership. In ideology and practice, AA is a carrier of the communitarian strand in American society, viewing alcoholism as a disorder of individualism. On the other hand, its program for counteracting "self will run riot" presumes substantial individuation. The 1980s saw the growth of a generalized 12-step consciousness, based on AA ideas but also drawing on potentially conflicting ideas about codependency; these may be undercutting AA's organizational solidarity. Though other 12-step groups have room for growth, AA may be close to having reached all of its potential constituency.

There are many potential ways to approach the topic of Alcoholics Anonymous as a social movement, and only a few of them will be given attention in this paper. We will first give brief consideration to the place of Alcoholics Anonymous in the formal sociological literature on social movements. Secondly, we will consider the current extent of membership in Alcoholics Anonymous in the U.S.: how broadly spread is AA's influence in the society, both directly through attendance at AA meetings and more indirectly through attendance at other groups modeled on AA's approach? Next, in view of AA's unique status as an organization which has to a large extent broken Michels' "iron law of oligarchy", we will consider in detail its organizational principles and practices. We will also consider how AA's ideology and organizational principles were from the beginning aimed at overcoming not only alcoholism but egoistic individualism, which might be viewed as the leading disorder of modernism. Lastly, we will consider the relation of AA's ideas and AA as an organization to the generalized 12-step consciousness which has come to the fore in the 1980s, and possible directions of future development of the movement.

AA and the Social Movement Literature

Traditionally, for sociologists the prototype of a social movement was a workers' movement -- a class-based movement to change society in the interests of its members' class. It has been pointed out, however, that already in the 19th century, in addition to such "beneficiary" movements, movements such as abolitionism and temperance based largely on "conscience" constituencies were prominent on the American scene (Zald, 1988). In recent years, there has been a mostly European literature on "new social movements", bringing into the analytical frame movements such as the ecology movement or the peace movement, whose members are aiming at social change, but are not acting on behalf of their own class or sectional interest. Considering AA in the light of this literature, Bloomfield (1988) and others have concluded that AA shares some characteristics of these "new social movements".

In other ways, however, AA does not fit the usual sociological meaning of "social movement". A social movement is usually thought of as aiming at change in the society in which it operates, while AA seeks only personal change among its members, and specifically renounces any ambition to change the surrounding society. It is clear that the conceptualization of social movements, and the focus of the literature, will have to be rethought if AA is to be fitted in. On the other hand, as we will discuss, there are signs of the emergence alongside AA of a generalized "12-step movement" with a greater resemblance to the traditional model of a social movement.

An alternative framing of AA is as a religious movement. To those approaching AA from a strictly rationalist frame (as many researchers do, and as a self-consciously scientific approach usually does) the references to "God as we understood Him", and the requirement to surrender to a higher power, are clinching evidence that we are dealing with a religious sect or movement. Further evidence, if it were required, can be drawn from AA's connection with the Oxford Group Movement at its inception, and from the parallels between AA's ideology as spelled out in the Twelve Steps and the ideology of the Oxford Group Movement (Bufe, 1991; Peterson, forthcoming).

On the other hand, when Bufe (1991), who is critical of AA from a rationalist position, compares AA's characteristics with those of a presumptively destructive religious cult, he concludes that AA does not fit many of the characteristics he enumerates for such a cult. In AA's own self-definition, it is a movement of spiritual renewal, but it is not a religion. Comparing AA with religious movements in general, Mäkelä (1990) has noted that it would be an unusual religion indeed which showed as little interest in origins and afterlives as AA

does. As an organization, AA thus does not neatly fit the usual descriptive categories of social science. This is of course more of a problem for social science than for AA. AA began as an organization *sui generis*, but it has become the prototype of a burgeoning category of mutual-help organizations. It is time that the sociology of movements and organizations took note.

The Extent of Membership in AA and Other Twelve-Step Groups

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935, but grew slowly at first, attaining about 100 members by the time it gained national media attention in 1940. After a period of sharp growth in the 1940s, AA's rate of growth flattened out in the 1950s, and then resumed a steady growth in the late 1960s and up to the present (Leach & Norris, 1977; "A Generation . . .", 1987). AA's own estimate of its membership in the U.S. and Canada in early 1990 was 978,982 ("Triennial Surveys . . .", 1990) -- about 0.48% of the population over age 18 of the two countries.

We recently were able to compare AA's own estimate of membership with estimates derived by other means (Room & Greenfield, 1991). As part of a 1990 nationwide study of drinking practices and problems, interviews were conducted with 2058 persons aged 18 and over, constituting a national adult probability survey of the conterminous United States (completion rate 70%). As part of this survey, respondents were asked a small series of questions about their attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous, other 12-step groups, and other support or therapy groups. In another section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about going to any form of treatment for "a problem in any way related to your drinking", and, for those answering yes, were asked about attendance at each of a list of agencies including AA.

Altogether, 3.1% of the adult population reported that they had ever been to an AA meeting about an alcohol problem of their own, and 1.5% reported that they had been within the last year. The 1.5% figure for attendance in the current year, of course, is three times AA's own statistics for current membership, suggesting that AA's membership counts are quite conservatively derived. On the basis of our respondents' answers on frequency of AA attendance, the top 0.5% of the sample (only a handful of cases, of course) each reported attending AA meetings 100 or more times in the last year.

However, these figures for attendance about one's own alcohol problem by no means exhaust the range of AA's influence in the population. Asked more generally about attendance at AA meetings, implicitly for any reason, 9.0% of U.S. adults reported having done so at some time in their life, and 3.4% reported having done so within the last year. Comparing these results, it is clear that attendance at an AA meeting does not necessarily imply a definition of oneself as having an alcohol problem; the attendance may be prompted by many factors, including curiosity or concern about someone else's drinking. On a lifetime basis, only about one-third of those who have been to an AA meeting acknowledge it to be for help with a drinking problem of their own; for the last year, the proportion is 42%.

Attendance at AA meetings far exceeded the proportion who had attended "another support or therapy group for an alcohol problem of your own" (1.9% lifetime, 0.9% in last year). On the other hand, substantial proportions had gone to meetings of other 12-Step groups: 4.6% on a lifetime basis for Al-Anon (1.7% in the last year), 1.7% lifetime for other Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) groups (0.8% in the last year), and 2.8% lifetime for any other 12-Step group (0.8% in the last year). Eliminating overlaps in attendance, altogether 13.3% of the population had attended a 12-Step meeting at some time in their life, and 5.3% had done so within the last year. This compared with 2.6% who had been to a non-12-Step

support or therapy group for non-alcohol problems, and 8.1% who had seen a therapist or counselor in the last year about a personal problem (not about drinking, and not in a support or therapy group). 12-Step meeting attendance thus plays a dominant role in support or therapy group attendance in the United States, and the reach of 12-step groups into the population is not far short of the reach of therapy or counseling of any kind.

A much larger portion of the general population, then, has some familiarity with AA practice and ideas than would be implied by AA's claimed membership of about 1/2% of the adult population. The results also make clear that AA's influence is not limited to those who have attended its meetings. Apart from the 9% who have ever attended AA meetings, another 4.3% have attended meetings of some other 12-step group, with more attending Al-Anon than any other group. Thus, about half as many people in the general population have attended an Al-Anon meeting as have attended an AA meeting. On the other hand, these figures remind us that, despite the proliferation of other 12-Step groups, AA still plays a dominant role in 12-step attendance.

While there is a well-developed research literature on AA, literature on other 12-step groups, other than the groups' own literature, is not well-developed. The new developments of the last ten years -- the burgeoning of new 12-step groups, notably including the ACOA movement and the development of a new consciousness of membership in a general 12-step movement -- have received only sketchy attention and little analysis. Yet these developments in organization and consciousness may well be among the more significant aspects of recent social changes in America. It may be argued that the radiation of the 12-step movement outward from AA is part of a process which bids fair to restore alcohol issues to the central position they occupied in American history in the century before 1930.

Organizational Principles of AA

Any continuing organization must make a series of choices about its internal organization and its relation to the outside world. How is membership in the organization to be defined -- to what extent inclusively or exclusively? What is the basic unit of organization: is it the individual, a face-to-face group, or some larger group? What are the forms of relation within the organization, both between individuals and between groups: egalitarian, hierarchical, a client/professional relation, or some mixture of these? Where in the organization are its assets held, and who controls them: the face-to-face group, the organization as a whole, an oligarchic trustees committee, etc.? How does the organization approach the outside world: evangelically, seeking alliances, or with a stance of splendid isolation?

AA's organizational principles steer a clear path through these questions. Membership is defined inclusively; on the other hand, the stance to the outside world is isolationist, neither accepting nor seeking outside influence. Power resides at the base, in the "group conscience" of the face-to-face group; all superstructures are defined as responsible to the base group level. Forms of relation are egalitarian, both within the group and between groups. Thus group officers and delegates are elected by group members, and incumbency is expected to rotate between members. Groups are autonomous, and cannot be subject to control either by other groups or by some superior body. The problem of where assets are held is solved in large part by a prohibition on owning property or holding substantial assets. As we shall note, there are nuances and even exceptions to these general choices, but their general direction is clear. To an unprecedented extent, AA has succeeded in creating an organization which breaks Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" (1958), by building in structures and principles which minimize the professionalization of leadership and keep effective organizational power at the level of

egalitarian face-to-face interaction. From another perspective, Bufe (1991) has remarked how well AA has carried into practice the organizational ideals of classical anarchist thought.

The heart of AA is a quintessentially oral occasion: the meeting. The movement certainly has written texts, in the form of Conference-approved literature, national and local magazines and newsletters, and a rich diversity of unofficial publications. But much of how AA operates is carried in an oral rather than a written tradition. Even a feature of AA as important as sponsorship is carried in the oral tradition; it is nowhere discussed in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (Anonymous, 1953). For another example, there is no central specification of an order of proceedings at an AA meeting, nor is it handed out in written form to participants; if it is written at all, it is on a dog-eared sheet handed on from one group secretary to another.

Like much else in AA, then, its organizational principles are carried in part in written form and in part orally. The primary written locus of AA's organizational principles is the Twelve Traditions, first published in Grapevine, AA's magazine, in May 1946, and adopted in revised form at the first AA International Convention at Cleveland in 1950. But there are principles of AA's organization which cannot be found anywhere in the Twelve Traditions, or otherwise spelled out in writing. Our discussion of the organizational principles is therefore not organized around the Twelve Traditions, although they are cross-referenced as appropriate.

(1) Openness of membership (Tradition 3). "The only requirement for membership is a sincere desire to stop drinking". AA has none of the ordinary means of maintaining a boundary between membership and non-membership: there is no membership roster to sign, and there are no membership dues. An important corollary of this is that there are no procedures for excommunicating or excluding from membership; AA defines itself as open to all comers.

This is an unusual organizational characteristic. Most political, religious or other voluntary organizations have a well-defined boundary between membership and non-membership. AA's bans on property and on professionalism (see below) help make its open membership structure feasible: there are no tangible assets for the members to share in or quarrel over, and the AA group is not financially burdened with maintaining professionals (a burden which tends to force a definition of membership in most religious congregations, for instance). The lack of any procedure for exclusion from membership has probably helped in avoiding splits and fractionation of AA as a movement, by removing the possibility of permanent victory in any internal faction fights.

On the other hand, openness of membership and attendance at meetings does sometimes create problems in the management of meetings. While AA meetings generally show a substantial tolerance for deviations from decorum, it is not unknown for obnoxious participants, and particularly drunken participants, to be physically ejected from meetings. Thus Johnson (1987:245) reports that in Southern California "on rare occasions someone who is extremely disruptive may be expelled from a group by disallowing him or her to use the club premises where the meeting is held". The standard AA texts offer no guidance on what to do about a recurrently disruptive attender. Al-Anon texts, which spell out some organizational matters in greater detail than AA texts, do contemplate a kind of informal excommunication from an individual group. For instance, where a member persists in spreading information from the meeting outside the group, "for the `greatest good of the greatest number', he may have to be warned and asked to leave the group if he continues" (Anonymous, 1981, p. 73). A major safety valve is the ability of one or another party in a continuing conflict to simply

form another group (see (2)(b) below). Thus Al-Anon's advice about dealing with a domineering group chairman, if persuasion fails, is that "stronger measures may have to be taken, perhaps ultimately to ask her to leave the group. . . . In some instances the members of such a group have left it and re-formed it without her." (Anonymous, 1981, p. 71).

(2) The group as the autonomous organizational base (Tradition 4). The fundamental organizational unit of AA is the group. A group is defined in terms of those who meet face-to-face at meetings scheduled for a particular place and time or times of the week. Individual members may consider themselves members of several groups, although there is informal encouragement to pick one as the "home group". Each group is "autonomous, except in matters affecting another group or AA as a whole" (Tradition 4). In principle, then, on most matters the group makes its own decisions. Just as there is no exclusion rule for individuals, there is no exclusion rule for groups.

The primacy and autonomy of the group is reinforced by several specific organizational principles.

(a) The group as self-governing, subject to no external authority or superstructure (Tradition 9). The discussion in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions emphasizes the distinction between "the spirit of vested authority and the spirit of service" (p. 174). AA has an elaborate structure of service boards and committees, elected directly or indirectly by AA groups, but power is firmly defined as lying at the base rather than in the structure: "our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern" (Tradition 2). Accordingly, it is noted in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (pp. 173-4), a headquarters communication to a group will be worded in the form of suggestions: "Of course, you are at perfect liberty to handle this matter any way you please. But the majority experience in A.A. does seem to suggest. . . ."

In practice, there are some forms of recognition or non-recognition of AA groups. Johnson (1987:427-431) reports that in Southern California the local central office sends out a delegate to observe procedures in a new group, "to see that the group is not violating the Traditions", before listing it in the area directory of groups and meetings. Listing in the area directory is an important means of recruitment of new members, often by referral by others, so that denial of a directory listing may affect the continuation or growth of the group. But there is nothing to stop an unlisted group continuing and considering itself to be an AA group. Certainly failure to participate in and support AA's service structure does not hinder recognition; about half the groups listed in the directory for a northern California county fail to participate in and support AA's general service structure.

(b) No exclusive territories or franchises. No existing AA group can hinder a new AA group from forming, even if it is appealing to the same population as the existing group. This is a fairly unusual provision for a multicelled organization. In many denominations, the existing congregation has exclusive jurisdiction in a parish or locality; chapters of fraternal organizations usually have an exclusive franchise for some defined population.

The lack of exclusive jurisdictions might be regarded as a corollary of the autonomy of the group, extended to new as well as existing groups. But the wording of the Fourth Tradition ("each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups") could have lent itself to an alternative interpretation, since the formation of a new group might well adversely affect the status of an existing group.

The lack of exclusive territories or franchises provides both a safety valve for internal conflicts and a mechanism for organizational growth. As an AA proverb puts it, "all that is

needed to start an AA meeting are a resentment and a coffee-pot", reflecting that a new group often starts as the resolution of a conflict between members of an existing group. From an organizational perspective, the lack of any inhibition on forming new groups turns resentments and conflicts which might otherwise threaten group continuance into an instrument of organizational growth.

(c) The group as self-supporting (Tradition 7). Each group is enjoined to be "fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions". The expenses of the group are met from "passing the hat" during the meeting. Normally, these expenses would include rent, refreshments, literature purchases, and contributions to activities at the intergroup and general service levels. As noted above, not all groups in fact contribute to the AA structure beyond the group level. Refreshment expenses may be paid for by members separately, and the net literature expense may be small. Rental costs vary greatly from group to group; in some places, groups meet in public spaces that would not normally be charged for, though they may arrange to pay some kind of notional rent to preserve the principle of self-support. Traditionally, many U.S. groups have met in church basements and rooms, rented for a relatively small charge. In hard times and with the growth of 12-step groups, however, rents have tended to rise as churches come to view them as a significant source of income.

In the "long form" of the Twelve Traditions (Anonymous, 1953:189-192), the injunction to decline outside contributions is further spelled out: "we think that . . . any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous; . . . that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise."

(3) No affiliations or distractions. The principle that groups should be self-supporting obviously supports the maintenance of a bottom-up organization, where no group is financially dependent on another or on AA superstructures. However, AA texts give at least equal emphasis in the discussions of the self-support principle to the importance of refusing fiscal support from outside AA. The principle of self-support is thus also one of several principles designed to ensure that AA maintains a singleness of purpose (Tradition 5) and a central focus on the egalitarian fellowship of the AA meeting. Likewise, the principle of external anonymity, discussed below, among its other functions helps keep AA free of imputed affiliations by breaking the link between the external commitments of individual AA members and the fact of their AA membership. Other organizational principles aimed at avoiding affiliations or distractions include:

(a) Prohibition on external affiliations and endorsements (Traditions 6 and 10). The prohibition on affiliations goes in both directions: AA groups should not affiliate with any other organization, and neither will AA allow any other groups to affiliate with it. There is de-facto a partial exception to the latter for Al-Anon, which is indeed separately organized but has long had a special relationship to AA. However, with other Twelve Step groups, AA's relationship is fully at arms-length.

While AA has kept true to its prohibition on organizational affiliation with alcohol treatment programs, this may well seem a fine distinction to a client of a "Minnesota model" or "12-Step based" treatment program. In medical and other professional perspectives on treatment for alcohol problems, AA is often viewed as an adjunct to treatment, in particular as a cheap "aftercare" program. In the numerous U.S. treatment agencies which are "12-Step based", therapists and counselors will usually be members of AA themselves, and AA-like or AA meetings in the institutional setting will form much of the substance of the treatment program. AA has thus been coopted by the U.S. alcohol treatment system to the extent where

the uninitiated will tend to presume an affiliation exists.

(b) Prohibition on property ownership (Tradition 6). AA groups, and AA as a whole, are enjoined from owning any real property, "lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary spiritual aim". This principle is the most radical departure from usual organizational practice in the U.S.: the greatest aspiration of a new congregation or fraternal club is normally to own its own building, and most voluntary associations would jump at such a chance. AA's rule recognizes that property issues, on the other hand, are often sources of collective and individual strife in churches and voluntary associations. In the "long form" of the Traditions, the potential utility of property to AA is recognized, but a clear organizational separation from AA itself is enjoined: "any considerable property of genuine use to A.A. should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. . . . Secondary aids to A.A., such as clubs or hospitals . . . ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups" (Anonymous, 1953, p. 190).

The most extensive exception to the prohibition on property ownership is the copyrights maintained on AA publications and the registered trademarks on AA symbols. AA's publishing effort is at one and the same time an intrinsic part of the organizational program and a substantial source of revenue which has long been used to support the costs of the AA structure (service worker wages, travel, etc.) above the group level. Preliminary data from the International Collaborative Study of Alcoholics Anonymous suggest that in North America as well as some other industrial countries literature sales account for as much as half of the total revenue of the national level of AA.

The issue of whether and how much AA's superstructure should depend on profits from literature sales has been a source of recurrent discussion in AA, leading sometimes to downward adjustments in literature prices to diminish the profits and thus the organizational dependence on them. Legal action to protect trademarks is a more recent phenomenon, and those opposing it regard it as a break with the Traditions. Thus a letter to Recovering, a San Francisco-area 12-step newspaper, comments that controversies over AA's trademark lawsuit demonstrate the unexpected and uncontrollable problems that often result from property ownership. Why does AA own a trademark? Doesn't that ownership violate the [Traditions]? . . . Lawsuits and public controversy? That's not How It Works. (W., 1991b)

(4) Internal equality and democracy. AA texts emphasize the equal status of AA members, an equality symbolized by the expectation that each member should take on a common status identification, traditionally heavily derogated in the world at large: "my name is X, and I'm an alcoholic". In discussing leadership in the context of the Second Tradition, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions does acknowledge that old-timers in the movement often play a role of moral leadership, but it distinguishes between "bleeding deacons" and "elder statesmen", with the latter subordinating their personal judgement to the group decisions of the "group conscience". In line with this discussion, seniority in the movement does play a considerable part in who ends up in what position in the structure, and groups often impose a minimum length of sobriety as a prerequisite for election to office in a group, but the formal equality of AA members carries much more substantive weight than the formal equality, say, of U.S. citizens or of Communist Party members. A number of principles and procedures weigh against the build-up of hierarchy or oligarchy within AA.

(a) No professional relationships (Tradition 8) "Alcoholics Anonymous will never have a professional class", begins the discussion of the Eighth Tradition in Twelve Steps

and Twelve Traditions (p. 166). Although mutual help between members is at the heart of AA's practice, such help ("Twelfth-Step work") within the context of AA must not be paid for, but must be freely given. This principle, of course, radically distinguishes AA from "12-Step based" treatment agencies, in which recovering alcoholics are routinely employed as counselors. Since the 1950s and the rise of "12-Step based" treatment institutions, the complex and often blurred roles of the "Two-Hatter", the AA member who is also a professional alcoholism therapist, have been a continuing issue for concern and discussion within the AA movement. Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions tends to emphasize the lure and distraction of money in discussing the rationale for the Eighth Tradition, but perhaps more important is its role in excluding the status relationship of professional vs. client from AA's process. Such a status relationship would fundamentally compromise the principle of equality of members.

It is curious that neither in the discussion of the Eighth Tradition nor elsewhere in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions is there mention of the role of sponsor, although sponsor/sponsee relationships have long been an important element of AA's practice. Instead, the reference is simply to the "twelfth-stepper". Perhaps it was felt that any reference to the sponsor role in the canonical texts would tend to undercut the norm of the equal status of members.

(b) Elected and rotating leadership. The discussion of the Second Tradition in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions clearly favors elections as the method for choosing group leadership, although in line with the principle of group autonomy elections are not mandated. The AA Service Manual lays out a suggested method of election to be used by group delegates, involving successive ballots to seek an absolute majority, with a drawing of lots in case of a tie. Rotation of representation and leadership is mandated in the service structure, and is recommended to groups concerning their own leadership (Anonymous, 1953, p. 191).

The principle of election of course enforces the ideology of a bottom-up structure, and the principle of rotation helps keep the leadership structure open and relatively free of oligarchy. That voting is implicitly open to all members, no matter how new, supports the ideology of equality of status of members.

Rotation and election rules within a group are in the end up to the group, on the principle that groups are self-governing. Groups clearly vary considerably in the extent to which there is in practice a regular rotation of leadership.

(c) Decisions by consensus. The only formulation concerning processes for group decision-making offered in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions is in the Second Tradition: "For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority -- a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience". "Group conscience" in AA terminology has come to mean decisionmaking by consensus. This does not necessarily mean complete unanimity, but neither does it mean decisions by majority vote. Instead, it entails a frequently lengthy discussion in search of common denominators before the group decision is taken.

Although the Higher Power is almost omnipresent in the Steps, this is its only appearance in the Traditions. Thus, while other elements of the organizational principles are worded and justified in rational terms, the process of group decision-making is associated with the sacred and the mysterious. This is no accident: as we will further discuss, Bill W. saw "self will run riot" as the central vice of the alcoholic, and thus would have seen the subordination of the individual ego to collective interests as the stress-point in making the organization work.

As noted above, elections of officers and delegates are excluded from the principle of decision-making by consensus, although here, too, the widest possible consent is sought.

Otherwise, the consensus principle is almost universally applied. But not quite. In California, at least, decisions about whether a meeting is to be a smoking or a non-smoking meeting, as consciousness changed on this issue, have sometimes come down to majority voting. Johnson (1987:443) observed two majority votes on this at successive meetings of a group, in a situation complete with meeting-stacking and other manipulations reminiscent of party politics.

(d) Internal openness -- no secrecy of process, partial anonymity. Although, as discussed below, anonymity with respect to the outside world is firmly maintained, information, including names, is relatively freely available within AA. This is partly a matter of convenience or necessity: AA groups often circulate a list of names and addresses of members to their members, as an aid to Twelfth-Step work and to organizational maintenance. Worldwide listings of AA groups and meetings facilitate visiting and networking by traveling members. But the transparency of AA as an organization and the availability of information to members is also an important means of limiting oligarchic tendencies and subordinating the service structure to members' governance.

(e) External anonymity (Traditions 11 and 12). The principle of external anonymity invoked in the organization's name is justified on several grounds. It facilitates AA's policy of "attraction rather than promotion" in public relations. As noted above, it reinforces the principle of avoiding affiliations and distractions. But it also is a crucial element in maintaining equality and democracy within AA. It is a common experience of social movements with a democratic style and a collective leadership that these principles are inexorably undermined by the results of media attention to the movement. Reporters and authorities want to deal with leaders, preferably as few as possible, and a spokesperson for the movement soon becomes a celebrity. The enhanced status in the outside society tends to be reflected back into the organization's internal processes. An oligarchic leadership for the movement can thus be created not by internal but by external processes. Again, the ideological emphasis on individual egoism as a main problem for alcoholics may have tended to underline the special importance of anonymity in an organization of alcoholics. Certainly, AA as an organization struggled with and over the anonymity principle in its early days, and the principles enunciated in the 11th and 12th Traditions were hard won.

AA, Individualism and Modernity

AA came into being in a culture and a social class fond of quoting the verse, "I am the captain of my fate, I am the master of my soul". Success and happiness were defined, particularly for men, as things one created for oneself, and as things which would be attained by hard work and utmost attention to duty. To give it labels, it was a cultural milieu characterized by radical individualism and by a belief in the inevitability of progress at the level of the individual as well as of the society. As feminist ideas spread in the early 20th Century and middle-class women began to make careers of their own, the ideas were increasingly applied for women, too.

In the early and middle life of the men of the founding generation of AA, with a mean birth year of 1895 (judging by the stories in 1st edition of the Big Book -- see Room, 1989), the idea of progress came in for some rude shocks. The First World War put the whole idea of the progress of civilization in doubt, although it probably did not greatly disturb the ideal of individual betterment for those who survived it in one piece. But the Depression made a mockery of the idea that hard work would bring individual success. AA was born in the depths of the depression, among middle-class men many of whose lives had also been affected by the war. Its founding generation were by then middle-aged, and often had a tumultuous marital and family history, reflecting that their generation had also been at the leading edge of a half-

realized shift from patriarchal to companionate gender relations, and had pioneered the idea of divorce as a thinkable option for the middle class.

To borrow Madsen's term (1979), at its foundation AA was indeed a "crisis cult". It arose at a moment when the boat captained by the self-directed middle-class male had run aground on the reefs -- on the conflicting realities of a structural economic depression, and of an increasing willingness of women to contemplate (at least) kicking out their men.

As Levine (1978) has argued, the particular focus on alcohol as the destroyer of the dream was a well-worn groove in the culture. As an explanation of personal failure in a no-longer-Calvinist culture committed to redemption and to second chances, drinking had the wonderful feature of being externalizable. The bottle could be cast away, and the dream restored. In a generation committed from youth to heavy drinking as a symbol of revolt against "Victorian morality", it is no accident that the crisis cult coalesced around alcoholism.

But AA took on a larger agenda than simply stopping drinking -- perhaps it had to, since what came with Repeal had made stopping drinking more complicated than avoiding the bootlegger. What AA took on was nothing less than the ideology of radical individualism and the patterns of thinking that sustained it. For in the new social conditions, the ideology was no longer sustainable -- it had become a "soul-sickness".

AA took the individualist ideology on at the level of ideology. This is what lies behind Bill W.'s singling out of pride, of egoism, of "big-shot-ism" above all other vices of the alcoholic, and behind his failure to mention self-confidence among potential virtues (Anonymous, 1953). To get anywhere in the new circumstances, one had to deflate the ego, to abandon the notion that "I can do it for myself". But if one could not do it for oneself, where was the responsibility for its happening to lie? One answer was to rely on a professional. But professionals have limited mandates. A doctor may agree to take on responsibility for treating a disease, but cannot take responsibility for one's life. A second answer is to rely on a social group -- perhaps on AA itself. Synanon, for instance, adopted this solution, with eventually disastrous results. This answer might solve the problem for the foot-soldier, but it did not solve it for the group's leaders. AA chose a third answer: the responsibility should be given to a "Higher Power". Functionally, the Higher Power solution removed the burden from the individual, without transferring it either to another person or to an institution.

AA's particular form of the "Higher Power", however, came from radically individuated Protestant traditions: this was a Higher Power characterized by the individual him/herself and speaking unmediated to the individual. Like a homeopathic remedy, the cure for the pathology of individualism itself was drawn from individualist thinking. The focus on pride as the besetting vice, on surrender, and on a Higher Power can all be seen as antidotes to the ideology of radical individualism.

AA also took the individualist ideology on at the level of ways of thinking, attacking the legitimacy of offering reasons for behavior, particularly when they are offered as justifications. The idea that an individual's actions should be justified by an individual-level set of reasons only makes sense in an individualistic world-view. The modern middle-class adult has spent many years in school learning what are acceptable reasons to offer where one's interests are at stake. With greater education, one becomes more adept at offering the proper reasons for what one is doing, ones which do not, for instance, sound racist or sexist. "Consciousness-raising" to a considerable degree is a matter of efforts to change the acceptability of particular rationales in everyday discourse. AA's identification of reasons as suspicious, and of justifications as erroneous thought, can be seen as an attack on individualist,

self-regarding habits of thought and talk. Thus Bill W.'s discussion (Anonymous, 1953) focuses on pride and its correlates as the underpinning which invalidates justifications.

Thirdly, AA took individualism on at the level of practice and organization. In this arena, its attack took many forms -- but again, there was often an individualist cast to the remedies for the pathology of individualism. The Twelfth Step taught the duty of helping others even when it was trouble to oneself, but noted that this was really the best, perhaps the only effective, way of helping oneself. The sponsor system built strong links between individual members, but sponsorship was left as a matter for the two individuals involved, rather than for central direction. Most obviously, the AA structure of non-hierarchical relations and of regular meetings as a central element of the program built a sense of community and sought to subordinate the individual will to the collective conscience ("our common welfare should come first").

It has long been fashionable for sociologists to focus on the individualism in American life (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985), but there is also a strong communalist countertheme in American history. Much of AA practice and organizational structure borrowed from or reinvented older forms in the culture. The Quaker meeting offered a model of a non-hierarchical meeting composed of personal testimonies -- and of a decision rule of substantial consensus rather than majority voting. Protestant denominations with "congregational polity" -- the wing of the Reformation which had radically dismantled hierarchical governance -- offered examples of acephalous organization, with anyone allowed to set up a new congregation. Fraternal organizations such as the Masons, the Oddfellows, and the temperance fraternities, all of which flourished greatly in late 19th-century America, offered models of mutual-interest groups with a strong emphasis on regular meetings and on fellowship, and in some cases on secretiveness with respect to the outside world. Since the time of de Tocqueville's observations of the early temperance movement, the United States has been a society of meeting-goers, of voluntary organizations arising spontaneously and autonomously for a myriad of purposes. Whether in student governments in school or college, in New England town meetings, in congregational business meetings, or in professional conventions, middle-class Americans, and many working-class Americans also, have considerable life experience with collegial meetings with regular meeting-times, set rules of order allowing challenges from the floor to any "railroading", and a regular rotation of meeting organizers. AA was able to draw on this unnoticed reservoir of cultural experience as its traditions developed.

What is perhaps most unusual about AA in this cultural context is its decision about collective property -- that its meetings would not own any substantial collective property (distinguishing it from church congregations and many fraternal organizations) and would not hold any franchise on a territory or population (distinguishing it, for instance, from Rotary). In this, AA chose to set itself apart from U.S. capitalist traditions, at the collective as well as individual level. Again, Bill's discussion of the rationale and experience behind the Sixth Tradition is in terms of counteracting the individualistic egoism of alcoholics -- "nearly every one of us had wished to do great good, perform great deeds, and embody great ideals. We are all perfectionists who, failing perfection, have gone to the other extreme and settled for the bottle and the blackout" (Anonymous, 1953, p. 156).

The general burden of the argument above is that AA is, in many complex and often ironic ways, a movement entwined with modernity, both in ideology and practice (compare argument in Kurtz, 1979, p. 216 etc.). At the obvious level of its characterization of its opponent as alcoholism, it depends for the logic of its existence on a conception of drinking

deviance arising after Foucault's "shift of gaze" in the early 19th century (Levine, 1978). At a deeper level, its attack on pathologies of individualism, and particularly on egoistic pride, makes sense particularly in societies (or sections of societies) with a radically individualist ideology. If we find AA growing successfully in milieux outside these limits, we may hypothesize that AA's ideology there will have shifted considerably from its origins.

AA is also entwined in modernity in its solutions to the problems it takes on. It asks that the newcomer act and think individualistically -- in defining for him/herself a Higher Power, in finding a suitable meeting and sponsor, in speaking up about his or her own experience. It offers organizational forms and traditions which assume a democratic culture and, to some extent, urban rhythms of life. In throwing their weight towards the collectivist side of modern traditions, AA's methods often take for granted aspects of an individualist frame of thought.

In the context of North America, AA can be seen as a corrective to pathological aspects of the culture of individualism. But in a wider world context, its cultural thrust is more equivocal. In contexts such as Central America, AA may be the carrier of modernity, and may be on the leading edge of the introduction of individualist habits of thought and action into the culture.

The Future: AA and the Emergence of a Generalized 12-step Consciousness

In the course of the 1980s, many of those who participated in Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups came to think of themselves as members of a more general phenomenon, a "12-Step movement" or a "recovery movement" transcending AA or the other particular groups which they attended (see Room, 1992). This shift in consciousness came in the wake of the growth of the Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) movement, which got under way in the early 1980s. The shift may have been associated with the personal odysseys of many ACOA members. Some, for instance, moved on from the ACOA movement to AA as they became concerned about their own drinking, and then to Women Who Love Too Much groups or Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous groups as they moved to do something about their current pattern of relationships.

A conviction on the part of growing numbers of people that they were multiply addicted was probably a precondition for moving towards a general 12-step consciousness. The conventional recourse has been to attend a different 12-step meeting for each problem, often tackling the problems one at a time so that the individual's group membership is serial or cumulative. But many seem to find this problematic: "if I deal with my codependency at one meeting, my addiction at another, my abuse issues at yet another, where, when and how do I put it all together?" (W., 1991a). No formal response to this problem has yet emerged, although it is reported that "there are unofficial 'All Anonymous' meetings where sharing on any addiction is allowed. There are unofficial Twelve Step meetings where those from many programs gather for step study and don't discuss individual diseases" (M., 1991).

Undoubtedly some members of AA would welcome a unified organizational form that reflected a generalized 12-step consciousness. This is unlikely to emerge from AA or other condition-specific 12-step groups themselves, however, if only because of their polity. Group-level consensus decision-making, with little in the way of a hierarchical decision-making structure, is about the most conservative possible form of organization: innovation can be effectively blocked by a small minority at multiple levels. Neither a solution in which AA expands its scope to cover other problems, nor one in which there is a substantial merger of associations, seems at all likely. If a unified 12-step fellowship were to emerge, it would probably be as a new organization which gradually drew strength away from existing

fellowships.

A more likely scenario for greater unification is in terms of a continuation of present trends: of the growth of facilities formally outside the 12-step groups but providing services across associations. Clubhouses serving a variety of 12-step groups, newspapers like Recovering, sections on "recovery" in bookstores, and 12-step stores, cruises, and conferences serving all in the "recovery community" are already well established. The commercial impulse which often takes over outside the associations themselves dictates appealing to the widest possible market.

The movement towards a generalized 12-step consciousness complicates personal and social responsibilities: instead of having a master status as an "alcoholic" or "overeater", and organizing oneself around recovering from that addiction, increasingly one is expected to examine and feel responsible for a wide variety of addictive behaviors. This shift in part lies behind the decline of smoking in California AA meetings; even the totemic coffee-pot has come under increasing scrutiny. One letter to Recovering complains about what the author calls "12-step bashing": the Overeaters Anonymous member, for instance, who tells "the recovering alcoholic that he or she is not really sober if they still drink coffee, eat sugar, or smoke" (G., 1991). At an institutional level, Recovering has felt constrained to limit its advertising to events or behaviors which would not feed any of the recognized addictions of its readers (Atkins, 1989/90). The ideology of "codependence", which subjects to scrutiny any behavior that might be seen as enabling another's addiction, conflicts with the traditional AA live-and-let-live ideology.

There is also a deeper conflict between general 12-step movement ideology and some strains of the ACOA movement, as some Recovering correspondents have noted (B., 1991). Locating the source of one's life problems not in one's own behavior but in family processes around another's behavior, ACOA ideology encourages self-reliance, self-regard and indeed putting one's own interests first. The emphasis on giving up trying to control another's behavior was there from the beginning of Al-Anon, but before the 1980s it was applied in the context of family dynamics, rather than to life in general. Now the ideology has been generalized, often in the concept of "codependency" -- "a general tendency toward being too other-directed". Alongside the various strands of the ACOA movement, Co-Dependents Anonymous, which began at the end of 1986, had grown to 1600 meetings by mid-1990; an observer wondered: "Is CoDA what we've all been waiting for, an opening to the general population, the 12-step program for everybody?" (W., 1990).

Such an ideology is, of course, quintessentially individualistic, and putting it into practice tends to undermine any altruistic or community-building behavior. The ideology thus potentially subverts important features of 12-step groups -- 12th-stepping, sponsorship, and the empathy and service ethics -- features which are, in fact, the most crucial for institutional survival.

The ideology of the coalcoholism and codependency movements holds further hidden conflicts with AA's original ideology. Where AA members are taught to be suspicious of any rationalizations of their behavior ("your best thinking got you here"), the "co" movements start from a rationalization and interpretation of one's own behavior in terms of external factors -- the behavior of others. In emphasizing the effects on one's current life of patterns in the family of upbringing, the ACOA movement chooses a psychodynamic view of life problems, akin to the psychoanalytic views of the 1930s (Roizen, 1977), as opposed to AA's more phenomenological view. Hand in hand with this epistemology, the thinking of the "co" movements is much more heavily dominated by professional therapists. The central texts of

the movements are not anonymously compiled, but are written by therapists who have acquired a celebrity status. Some groups, such as Robin Norwood's Women Who Love Too Much groups, are organized explicitly around the writings of a particular therapist. Quite a few "co" groups have deviated from 12-step practice in having a professional-led or hierarchical structure.

We might therefore guess that 12-step groups built around codependency concepts will not find it easy to maintain themselves as self-governing nonhierarchical organizations. But the influx of codependency ideas may also weaken AA itself. This may be part of the explanation of some recent reports of attenuation of AA 12th-stepping traditions (see Room, 1992), and of the finding in a study of AA in Marin County (Kaskutas, 1989) of increasing difficulties in getting people to fill the minimum service positions to keep meetings operating. The attractive power of the movement is likely to lessen if its meeting structures and processes weaken.

All movements, in any case, eventually reach a saturation point, where they have exhausted the population pool from which they draw. Usually, the high-water mark of a movement is still only a small fraction of all those who were eligible. From this point of view, AA may be approaching saturation in the U.S. Comparing the 9% of the U.S. adult population who have ever attended an AA meeting with the one-fifth or so who ever drank at all heavily, we might guess that the upward curve of AA membership in the U.S. cannot long continue. As a whole, the broad spectrum of 12-step groups must be seen as further from saturation, but it is worth keeping in mind that already about as many U.S. adults went to a 12-step group in the last year as went to any kind of psychotherapist or counselor.

Against this, it must be noted that each stage in AA's growth could hardly have been predicted before it occurred. It would have been a brave observer of AA before 1939 who would have predicted its take-off in the early 1940s. A commentator in the 1950s might well have concluded that AA was associated with a particular age-cohort, and would dwindle like, say, the Women's Christian Temperance Union as its founding generations aged and died. A social analyst in the 1970s might have predicted that AA's organizational vitality would be sapped by the growth of public and private alcoholism treatment institutions. An observer in the 1980s might have expected recruitment to AA to decline in parallel with the fall in U.S. per-capita consumption after 1981. So far, AA has confounded any such predictions, growing to become a pervasive influence in American life, with an expanding presence also on the world stage. When the history of the 20th century is written, AA will be merit discussion, not only for its influence in the specific field of alcohol problems, but also for its influence as a general organizational model -- a model of how mutual help efforts can be workably organized on a nonhierarchical, nonprofessionalized and flexible basis.

Author's note

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