Ethnography: Alcoholics Anonymous

Audrey Uchimoto

Loyola Marymount University
Alcoholics Anonymous, also referred to as AA, is a fellowship of men and women who share their experiences, strength and hope with each other so that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The organization was founded in 1935 by Bill Wilson, an alcoholic himself, who after having “a vision of God in a hospital room vowed to never drink again and help others to stop the same way he did” (Conan, 2010). AA developed in Akron, Ohio, where Wilson first set out to work with alcoholics. As years passed, the popularity of the organization increased as more and more people joined the organization hoping to recover and help others recover from alcoholism. Today AA “claims an estimated 2.1 million members worldwide, with 1.3 million of them U.S. residents” (What is AA?, 2013). Although AA is one of the most widely known organizations to date, so little is truly understood about the organization from an outsider’s perspective. From direct field research and interviews within the organization, my ethnography will provide an inside look at the organization, Alcoholics Anonymous, in hopes of understanding what makes the organization so successful.

**Internal Communication:**

AA is a nonprofit organization that is nonprofessional and self-supporting. The organization “does not have clinics, doctors, counsellors or psychologists. All members are themselves recovering from alcoholism and there is no central authority controlling how AA groups operate” (What is AA?, 2013). There are no age or education requirements to join AA, the only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking. Therefore, AA has a vast member demographic including people of all ages, races, and economic status. People who generally would not mix, come together in AA because they have something they can relate to one another and all share the common goal to recover from alcoholism.
When Bill Wilson was creating the organization AA he emphasized that alcoholism was a malady of mind, emotions and body. Wilson believed in order to obtain sobriety, an alcoholic must learn to live a positive life without alcohol. As a result, Wilson created the “12 Steps” a recovery program in which the organization is structured. When one becomes a member of the organization they begin their 12 Step recovery program, which guides the individual through a transformation of life that includes a spiritual wakening and results in the individual becoming a different person through their sobriety. The time it takes each member to finish their 12 Steps varies by individual but is always a lot of work. Once one has completed their 12 Step program it is their job to take the message out and be of service by sponsoring someone through their 12 Steps. Sponsors are a very important role in the organization AA because each member of the organization needs a sponsor to guide them through the process.

The 12 Steps are outlined in the “Big Book” which can best be described as AA’s bible. The roots of AA were grounded in religion and the varieties of religious experience are evident in the 12 Steps, “in which God has much more of a presence than alcohol” (Buddy, 2009). Today, “four of the 12 Steps in the AA program mention God directly, and the 12th calls for a ‘spiritual awakening as a result of these steps’” (Buddy, 2009). Although the organizational structure of AA was grounded in religion, “AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution, and does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes” (What is AA?, 2013). The primary purpose of the organization is to help alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

Rituals of the organization are the AA meetings. Meetings are where members come together to talk about their past struggles with addiction and support one another on their quest for sobriety. The AA meetings are very important because spending time with fellow alcoholics
helps members stay clean. There is a specific format to AA meetings, it always either starts or ends in prayer. The end prayer is always either the Our Father or the Serenity prayer and there is always a speaker at the meeting who is a member of the organization and shares his or her story of alcoholism. A specific tradition that takes place during each AA meeting is the Chip System. Chips are passed out during each meeting to celebrate a member’s 30 days sober, 60 days, 90 days, three months, nine months, and yearly. Every year a member has been sober they get a cake and it is considered their AA birthday. The chip system helps members not to relapse by rewarding them for continuing to stay sober.

Due to the popularity of the organization, AA meetings can be found in every town and are often held in schools and churches but can ultimately be held anywhere members can freely talk among one another comfortable. The environment within an AA meeting is very nonjudgemental and members are taught to be vigorously honest. This creates trust between members and develops a community within the organization that allows members to understand and help each other. Other than meetings, AA holds conventions, both internationally and statewide, where thousands of members attend.

**External Communication:**

The mission of AA is to help alcoholics. As well known of a name AA has, the organization does not use advertisements to market AA to the outside world. This is partly due to the AA traditions in that “every AA group is to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions” that could offer advertising aid and “AA groups are never to endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any facility or outside enterprise, because problems of money, property and prestige divert members from their primary purpose” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). Little
about AA is presented to the outside world is also due to how Bill Wilson developed the organization. Wilson made one of AA's standard practices that all members remain anonymous.

“Anonymity was used initially as a way of protecting members from the stigma of being known as an alcoholic, but it became a way to protect the group as well. If members sought publicity or were known to the press or public and fell off the wagon, the founders figured, it might harm AA's reputation and threaten the group's survival”

(Rawlings, 2010).

Due to the anonymity aspect of AA, the organization is not publicized to the external world. For this reason, outsiders know very little about the organization and oftentimes view AA as a cult.

Self-Reflexivity:

Until recently, I knew close to nothing about the organization AA. I have spent most of my life growing up in a small town in Pennsylvania with a loving family and great friends. Drug and alcohol abuse was never a part of my life and therefore alcoholism was just a word in my mind and never a reality.

When I came to Loyola Marymount for freshman year of college I quickly made friends with a girl named [Redacted]. [Redacted] was one of the nicest girls I had ever met and she soon became my best friend at school. [Redacted] and I decided to become suite-mates our sophomore year of college and I could not wait to be living with one of my best friends. Just a few weeks into my sophomore year I was noticing changes in [Redacted]. She began fighting with her boyfriend all the time and cried almost on a nightly basis. She then began drinking alcohol, something she had never done before during the time I had known her. At first I thought nothing of it because we
were in college and drinking alcohol is very popular among college students, but I quickly noticed someone was not drinking the way all my other friends were. She did not drink to go to parties or socialize with friends; someone was drinking by herself to the point where she would pass out.

As the months went on, someone got worse, she was drinking every day to the point of blacking out, and was no longer the same fun and happy friend I knew freshman year. I believed someone’s drinking was only a phase but when junior year came around she had only gotten worse. Not only was someone still drinking daily, the amount of alcohol she consumed each day was increasing. Her body was becoming reliant on alcohol and the only way to satisfy her growing tolerance was to drink more. One night someone drank so much she was hospitalized and flat lined on the table. Luckily, doctors were able to resuscitate her, but someone’s battle was far from over.

After being hospitalized from her excessive consumption of alcohol, someone went to rehab for a month and is now in sober living with other recovering alcoholics. Someone is now a member of Alcoholics Anonymous and is working everyday on her sobriety.

Someone was my firsthand experience with the struggles of alcoholism and how serious it really is. Not only did someone’s alcoholism cause her to lose almost all of her friends, her boyfriend, her good grades, and her happiness, she almost lost her life. AA has been very great for someone because it allowed her to meet other recovering alcoholics and connect with people who can relate to her. I have attended several of someone’s AA meetings in support of her recovery and love everything the organization has done for her. Although in the end it is someone who will have to make her own life decisions, AA has given her great guidance into leading a healthy life and has helped me get my friend back.

Zeitgeist and Context:
AA is a very important organization in today’s society due to the increase of drug and alcohol abuse. Kids are getting addicted to drugs and alcohol at younger and younger ages due to the popularity and accessibility of prescription drugs. The media also often portrays drugs and alcohol as being cool and sends the message that drug and alcohol use is fun and has no consequences. Before AA was founded, alcoholics and drug addicts would often be sent to jail or die. Now those who have gone down the wrong path and suffer from substance abuse have an alternative option to join AA and seek sobriety.

Due to the increase in popularity of AA and the spreading of the organization all over the world, meetings are now offered virtually online as well, so that members of AA in countries or cities where AA meetings are sparse can still attend meetings. Many organizations have stemmed from AA as well over the years. These programs have taken the fundamentals of AA and have shaped them to relate to other problems. With the increase of marijuana use across many states, Marijuana Anonymous has developed from AA and many more programs that relate to the struggles of today’s society.

**Theoretical and Methodical Approach:**

AA relates to Freudian theories of family dynamics. According to Freud’s theory, most family approaches stress the crucial role of present interpersonal pressures and communication patterns in shaping the experience of any individual in the family. The development of the particular pattern of interaction in which the family is caught occurs over time, of course; it has a past and a history. But any individual’s behavior is seen not as the linear, casual product of past events or experiences, but as part of a system of transactions between people that codetermine each other in the present. The history of this system of
interactions is a process of coevolution. Behavior patterns mutually evolve: A does not cause B’s behavior, nor does B cause A’s, rather they each shape each other’s behavior and therefore their own (Wachtel, 1990).

Freud's theory explains how within a family unit and relationships in general, our behavior is shaped by the communication we receive from the people around us. Individuals have people who influence them and motivate them to act a certain way. In a family structure, a child’s influenced and motivated by his or her parent. As the influencer, the parent is shaping the child’s behaviors. At the same time, the child is also influencing the parent and motivating the parent to behave a certain way because the parent knows they need to set a good example for the child. Freud's theory of family dynamics relates to the organization AA because of the influence and motivation the members have on one another in shaping their behavior.

**Application/Discussion:**

Freudian theories of family dynamics relates to the organization AA in multiple ways. Freud’s theory states “any individual’s behavior is seen not as the linear, casual product of past events or experiences, but as part of a system of transactions between people that codetermine each other in the present” (Wachtel, 1990). Every member of AA is a recovering alcoholic who shares the goal of sobriety. By creating a community in which everyone is working toward the same goal, AA is making it easier for recovering alcoholics to reach their goal by spending time with people who are acting in ways to achieve sobriety. The sponsor aspect of AA also relates to Freud's theory. Just as a parent influences and motivates a child to behave a certain way, every sponsor in AA influences and motivates a member to behave a certain way as well. At the same time, being a sponsor to someone influences and motivates the sponsor to act a certain way to set
a good example. In essence, what truly makes AA successful is the influence and motivation the members of the organization have on each other.

**Conclusions:**

From my research within the organization, I have found that a number of factors come together to make AA so successful. The founder, Bill Wilson, believed alcoholism to be a malady of mind, emotions and body, so he created the 12 Step recovery program the organization is structured around in which members undergo a transformation of life that includes a spiritual wakening and results in the individual becoming a different person through their sobriety. Not only do all members of AA share the common goal of sobriety, but they also help each other by influencing and motivating one another’s behavior through sponsorships. I am thankful for the organization AA because it offers abusers a second chance at a healthy life and most importantly, is saving my friend’s life.

**Limitations of the research:**

Although I was able to sit in on multiple AA meetings and interview members, my research was limited because I was only able to interview members in their early twenties. This was due to the fact that I attended AA meetings around UCLA, which pulled a demographic of college age members and very few members above the age of 30. This means that everyone I interviewed entered the organization at a fairly young age and probably have not been in the organization for a long period of time.

**Suggestions for future research:**

My suggestion for future research in the organization AA is to go to multiple AA meetings in various locations to pull from a greater demographic. It would be interesting to interview both new members and old members of AA to contrast their opinions on the
organization. I was only able to interview members who were in the process of their 12 Steps and members who had finished their 12 Steps, but I was not able to interview a member who had sponsored another member through their 12 Steps. I think interviewing a member who has sponsored another member would be able to give even more incite into the organization.

**Suggestions for the Org:**

During my interview with a member of AA we discussed ways in which the organization could be improved. My interviewee exclaimed,

> The way AA is set up is perfect. It has been working for 70 years. If anyone says something needs to change about the organization, then they don’t fully understand the organization. However, if any change was going to be made then maybe an addition to the “Big Book” which outlines the 12 steps could have an addition to cater to the younger demographic of today.

I believe this would be a good improvement for the organization because there are problems that exist today that did not exist in the 1940s. For example, a great number of young teenagers have contributed to the demographic of AA compared to AA 70 years ago. I think it is important to structure the organization to coincide with the current times and therefore and Big Book should be updated.
Sources


Rawlings, N. (2010). Top 10 things you didn’t know about alcoholics anonymous. TIME.


What is AA?. (2013). What is AA?. Alcoholics Anonymous Australia