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Exploring Recovery Experiences of Women in Alcoholics Anonymous

LINDA MYLLMAKI



Linda is a senior majoring in Social Work and will graduate in May of 2011. This research

was undertaken in the summer of 2010 as an Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant project. These studies were completed with the wisdom, expertise and inspiration of her mentor, Dr. Kathleen Bailey. Linda was able to conduct qualitative research in her field of study and presented her findings at the 2010 ATP Summer Research Symposium and at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) in March of 2011 at Ithaca College. Linda plans to work for DCF after graduating and pursue her Master's degree in Social Work.

Twelve step recovery programs are prevalent in the United States, however, there is relatively little empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of these programs for female alcoholics or addicts. How women experience the process of recovery within the twelve-step model is critical to our overall understanding of the recovery process. This article reports the results of an exploratory qualitative study of women in Alcoholics Anonymous. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, nine women were asked to discuss their personal experiences of recovery in the AA program. Grounded theory methodology was utilized to analyze the data. Reasons for joining AA, meeting attendance, sponsorship, concepts of a higher power and feelings regarding powerlessness emerged as dominant themes. Results showed external and internal influences played an important role in women's decisions to join AA. Regular attendance at AA meetings, considered essential to recovery in the program, was supported. Women preferred a reciprocal relationship with friends in AA as an alternative to a one-on-one association with a sponsor. All participants developed a concept of a higher power that worked for them that was fundamentally different than the "God" they had been taught about in their childhood religious education. The concept of powerlessness, as defined in Step One of the Twelve Steps of AA, was a positive concept among all women interviewed. This study adds to the knowledge base of evidence-based practice of women in recovery, and enhances knowledge of Twelve Step effectiveness for women.

Treatment specialists encourage their clients to utilize The Twelve Step model of recovery as their number one tool for gaining and maintaining sobriety. The most well-known self-help group is the original Alcoholics Anonymous. Because AA is widely available in most communities, it is easily accessible to all who wish to utilize it, making it a popular choice for people seeking recovery (Matheson & McCollum, 2008). The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous were all men. Shortly after meetings began, the first woman "materialized." The all male group panicked; they did not know what to do about this unexpected development. Resistance was strong against female members. Women were not supposed to be alcoholic; they were socially stigmatized and considered worse than men alcoholics (Makela et al., Institute of Medicine 1996). Female alcoholics now constitute one-third of Alcoholics Anonymous membership (1990), but there is little empirical evidence on the benefits of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to the female alcoholic or addict (Beckman, 1993). Although Twelve Step programs are

promoted by many treatment clinics and recommended by numerous addiction specialists, the efficacy of Twelve Step programs for females is an ongoing debate (Hillhouse, M., & Fiorentine, R., 2001). The first of the Twelve Steps members must embrace in AA states, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—and that our lives had become unmanageable” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976, p. 59). Many critics, especially some feminists, point to this first step as one that is unhelpful and unhealthy for women who are potentially moving into a healing phase of their lives (Beckman, 1993; Kaskutas, 1996).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A correlational study was designed by Rush (2000) to explore relations among power, spirituality, length of sobriety, and number of weekly meetings attended by sober alcoholic women who were members of Alcoholics Anonymous. The social support network and spiritual orientation of Alcoholics Anonymous were significant predictors of the choice of this study's sample of 125 sober alcoholic women. The research question was to determine whether either length of sobriety or number of weekly meetings attended was correlated to power and spirituality. A random snowball method was used in which subjects were either solicited directly by the researcher or referred by other subjects. The women who wished to participate received the study packet directly from the researcher at the site either before or after the open meeting or from members of the Alcoholics Anonymous network who volunteered to seek participants at meetings not accessible to the researcher, such as “gay” meetings. Self-reported questionnaires were used as the data-gathering instrument. The results of this study indicated that the number of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings attended weekly contributed significantly to power and to spirituality. Length of sobriety was not correlated with power or spirituality. No limitations were indicated for this study (Rush, 2000).

Covington's book, *A Woman's Way Through The Twelve Steps*, focuses on issues unique to women in recovery (Covington, 1994, p. 1-5). Her approach is a feminist view but suggests to women that they can be open to investigation and can modify the Twelve Steps for their own personal recovery. Covington (1994) has endeavored to relate to women on a personal basis, and provide many different perspectives on each step, enabling women to create their own map of recovery. Her Twelve Step guide may be used as a companion to the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous or by itself (Covington, 1994, p. 1-5).

METHODOLOGY

This study was an exploratory inquiry using qualitative methods. Face to face interviews were conducted. Because

this study seeks to understand perceptions of women in AA, a qualitative method was deemed best to give voice to the stories of these women. Data was gathered through nonschedule-standarized interviews.

Recruitment

Demographic details are recorded in Table 1 of this study. To locate women for this study, snowball sampling was used. Snowball sampling was initiated by interviewing one female friend who is an active member of AA. The researcher then gave the first participant several cards with researcher's name and phone number and requested that she pass the cards to female acquaintances she knows in the meetings she attends. The cards contained information about the study and requested that potential participants call if they were interested in participating in this study. Cards were given to women in the towns of Abington, Cohasset, Hanover, Hingham, Marshfield, Norwell, Rockland and Scituate, Massachusetts. Interviews were scheduled at the participant's convenience in a place of their designation. Word of mouth, phone calls, e-mails and visits to open AA meetings were also utilized as recruitment methods. Before conducting the interview and the participant signing the Informed Consent, the researcher explained the project and Informed Consent, the assurance of confidentiality, and asked permission for the interview to be digitally recorded. Possible risks, benefits and contact information for the people engaged in this study were also provided to the participant. The criteria were that participants had to be women over 18 using the 12-Step Program of AA for their recovery from alcohol/drug addiction. The total sample interviewed was 9 women.

Data Analysis

This study utilized grounded theory methodology for the analysis of the data. Grounded theory is a qualitative method of inquiry first proposed by Paul Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). As defined by Glaser and Strauss, the primary purpose of grounded theory is, “the discovery of theory from data” (p.1). The purpose of this study was to learn of the experiences of and give a voice to the women involved with A.A. Per Charmaz (2006), grounded theorists seek to give voice to the data as its starting point with development of concepts, theories and hypothesis only possible once the data has been heard. This qualitative method was deemed the most appropriate method of analysis.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed as soon as possible after the interview. Open coding and axial coding was utilized to develop relevant themes throughout the data analysis. Transcripts of the interviews were entered into the software program ATLAS.ti to assist with the coding of the

Table 1

Participant #	Age	Relationship		# Years in AA	Reasons
		Status	Education		For Joining AA
1	56	Partnered	Masters	28	Disgusted w/ Lifestyle
2	52	Partnered	14	3	Disgusted w/ Lifestyle
3	53	Divorced	12	18	Conflict w/ Partner
4	41	Partnered	16	3	Ultimatum by Partner
5	56	Partnered	13	15	Conflict w/ Partner
6	49	Partnered	16	9	Ultimatum by Partner
7	55	Divorced	12	8	DUI
8	49	Partnered	Masters	4	DUI
9	54	Partnered	12	24	Disgusted w/ Lifestyle

data. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure complete investigation of themes. Emerging themes were developed using constant comparative methods.

Results

A total of 9 women were interviewed from June 2010 through August 2010. All nine women were white. Five of the women were married. Two of the women were divorced. Two of the women were gay. Women were between the ages of 49 and 56 with a concentration of women in their fifties. Six of the women had two children, one had one child, and two women had no children. The length of time women reported having been members of Alcoholics Anonymous varied from 3 to 28 years with a mean of 12.4 years in AA. Three women reported themselves as alcoholics and six women were poly-drug users during their using phase.

These interviews were conducted to learn about women’s experiences in the program of AA. Findings included external and internal reasons for initial engagement with AA. Strong themes emerged related to meeting attendance, sponsorship, a higher power and powerlessness. AA contends that meeting attendance, getting a sponsor, developing a concept of a higher power and admitting powerlessness over alcohol are vital components in a person getting sober and maintaining sobriety.

Reasons for Joining Alcoholics Anonymous

There were two primary categories, external and internal, determined from analysis of the interviews as to the reason women gave for joining Alcoholics Anonymous. Five women expressed external reasons as having conflicts with a partner

or an ultimatum by a partner. Two women joined Alcoholics Anonymous because of a DUI. Two women had internal reasons which were articulated as disgusted with their lifestyle.

Meeting Attendance

When participants were questioned about their attendance at AA meetings, all participants stressed that regular meeting attendance was crucial to their recovery. Women reported meeting attendance reduced isolation and increased connections with other alcoholics. The women described meeting attendance as follows:

There are basics; absolutely there are basics that have to be followed, meetings are essential, essential. How many you go to, that’s really up to you. But meetings are essential.

I started going every day, [to meetings] made a commitment, and I was able to make connections which I hadn’t been able to make before. Seven days a week for 6 months I never missed a meeting and it was a variety of meetings.

Interestingly, length of sobriety did not seem to impact regular attendance in that women with longer sobriety continued to stress the importance of regular attendance.

Sponsorship

A sponsor is an Alcoholics Anonymous member who serves as a mentor to a newcomer in the program and guides them through the Twelve Steps. It is strongly suggested in the Alcoholics Anonymous program that everyone have a sponsor.

Women in this study preferred talking with female friends in AA instead of having a one on one relationship with an official sponsor. Reasons they gave for not having an official sponsor varied. One woman who had been sober for 3 years stated the following:

I have no problem with having a few people as my sponsor. Some people need more than others, you know, some people say you should call them every day; I don't believe in that myself. I don't absolutely have to call my sponsor every day. I could call another alcoholic every day, and I know a lot of alcoholics, so you know, I do talk to another alcoholic every day.

Another woman had been a member and sober for 18 years but had never had a sponsor.

I never got a sponsor ever. I haven't ever had one. ...but I felt like I didn't want somebody telling me what to do who was not any healthier than me. I just didn't want an official boss.

This woman has been sober for 3 years and had a negative experience with her sponsor. She gives the following reason as to why she does not want one person as a sponsor.

My sponsor is, ironically, the only thing that has jeopardized my sobriety in 3 years in AA, was my sponsor. Now I take it as a cautionary tale, I don't think sponsorship is inherently bad at all. I'm kind of co-sponsored by about 4 people at the moment but I'm leery about asking another woman to be my sponsor. I have a set of friends...sponsorship works well if it's reciprocal. ...right now, I don't feel like I need a woman with 20 years of sobriety and calling her everyday...I don't need marching orders, I need a friend. The cautionary tale that I took away from my first sponsor is that I don't want to get--she also needs to be somebody who is not going to get too enmeshed in my life.

One woman stated that she doesn't want to deal with the "power grab" that she experienced with her first sponsor.

I have a very, very good friend and I believe I act as a sponsor to her and she acts as a sponsor to me but we are not sponsors. We haven't formalized that at all. For my part, and I think this is true for her, I don't want that power grab with her but what I do want is I will always go to her first to get her opinion on any issues I have. I know she uses me in that context.

But there's nothing like you have to call me every day, there's none of that...

This woman had been in the program for over 9 years and gave a short, curt answer as to the sponsorship question.

I don't have a sponsor, I'm self sponsored. I talk to [her girlfriend] a lot.

This woman is a lesbian and had a difficult experience with a lesbian sponsor. She has never had a sponsor since getting rid of her first sponsor, and she was adamant that she would never have another sponsor.

It never did [sponsorship never worked for her]. No I don't [have a sponsor]. One time I got a lesbian as my sponsor and she fell in love with me and then proceeded—I shared personal stuff—and proceeded to use that to like woo me and I felt like it was incestuous and was pissed.

The responses from these women indicate that a sponsor/sponsee relationship can be challenging, and they prefer having "friends" to talk with about their problems instead of one official sponsor. Several women reported having had a negative experience with a sponsor. One participant had never had a sponsor in her 18 years of sobriety. Two of the women were currently serving as sponsors to other women and they also had a sponsor. Seven of the women had never sponsored another woman.

Higher Power

All 9 women interviewed had developed a higher power that works for them as suggested by the program of AA. It is interesting to note that concepts of a higher power were not necessarily related to the Christian ideal of a higher power. Seven out of 9 women had a different concept of a higher power than the "God" they had learned about as children. When these women were asked their concept of a higher power, they responded as follows:

To have hope, to know that there's forces out and about that are working for me and with me if my mind is in the right place and I ask. Like karma, almost. If I'm doing what I'm supposed to then good things will come to me. Just trying to be a good person and I do believe it comes back.

I don't think of my higher power in a religious sense, I do call my higher power God but it is more of a spiritual connection.

...the closest thing I had come was this feeling of sort of spiritual energy that I had taken away from Buddhist doctrines and readings and to this day I'm fascinated by it. I study it a lot, I read a lot. It just feels like it is a positive energy that's there for anybody and there isn't a lot of judgment, or dogma or hate, and you can't really do it wrong.

I have a very strong connection to a higher power out there that really doesn't have a lot of definition for me, but there's a higher presence, a higher power and it has a lot—there's so much to it and I feel—I almost feel like it is a scientific thing also and I would like to look into that more.

You know, the God thing that the church taught me—the holy being as creator—I don't know if I necessarily believe in that one holy creator anymore. I don't think I'm agnostic and I don't think I'm atheist. I think it is a lot deeper than that for me. I don't feel like we're it. My thoughts have gotten very deep around the concept of us alone as human beings and I don't believe in the 7 days and 7 nights concept of God created us. I don't think that we were created. So my concept of God has changed. I don't think that it is a one being. I think it is a lot deeper than that.

This woman is an agnostic, but has developed a higher power that works for her.

"It's actually kind of neurologic to tell you the truth, but it's not outside of my brain casting, it's you know, it's kind of the prefrontal cortex. I know this to be true because I have researched it—but alcoholism is a physiologic disease too. It's psychological and physiological. People say spiritual and I kind of feel like well spiritual is philosophic or whatever. But there is damage in that prefrontal cortex and I think when you stop drinking, when you connect with other people—I think it's really important to talk about the things that sort of pre...what am I trying to say—predisposed you to becoming an alcoholic...I think what is actually happening is that your brain heals. So, often when I appeal to my higher power, it is actually appealing to the rational thought process that I have...when I engage my rational or higher power brain, I can see that I'm overwrought. You can feel anxious, but you don't need to feel that anxious about it."

"The basic principles of AA, as they are known today, were borrowed mainly from the fields of religion and medicine,

..." (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 16). Having a higher power in AA and believing one can receive direction and guidance from this higher power is an enormous source of spiritual power to these women. Most of them expressed relief that they now have a higher power and they "do not have to run the show." This means that they give up trying to control everything in their lives and the lives of others.

Powerlessness

Step One is defined in AA's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions as, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—and that our lives had become unmanageable" (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 21). Contrary to some feminists pointing to the first step as one that is obstructive and detrimental for women who are trying to change their lives by joining AA and striving for sobriety, the nine women interviewed had a positive view of powerlessness as it pertains to the first step.

I couldn't stop drinking. Before, powerlessness was a negative thing...it's a freedom I have today where before it was a burden. So, it has gone from burden to freedom.

I couldn't stop drinking. I thought I had no will power. I had no power over alcohol. It completely controlled me once it went into my system—and once it goes in there you can't take it back, it's there.

I wasn't making the decisions, alcohol was making the decisions—and that, to me is powerlessness.

I feel like with any honesty the alcohol made me powerless. Being on that wheel of not being able to trust myself—the amnesia—I still feel not just disgusted but just dismayed that there are parts of my life that I won't remember because of alcohol—that is powerless. And if you don't call it that, that is stupidity.

The participants in this study felt being aware of their powerlessness over alcohol was a strength, not a disadvantage.

Discussion

The intent of this study was to learn about the experiences of women in AA. By focusing on reasons for joining AA, meeting attendance, sponsorship, higher power and powerlessness, this study helped clarify what these experiences were like for the women interviewed.

Each woman had a choice as to whether they wanted to join AA to find out if they could stop drinking, but external and internal

influences played an important role in their decisions. No one shows up at the door of AA if they do not have a drinking problem. Several women I interviewed proclaimed that conflict with and an ultimatum by their husband forced their decision to attend AA. Other reasons women gave for joining AA was a first DUI. For a first DUI, a person is required to attend drug/alcohol classes and a requirement for this program is to attend AA meetings. The women disgusted with themselves and their lifestyles were afraid that if they continued to drink, they would lose their jobs and the lives they had spent many years working for. No one specifically told them to go to AA or move out. Women decide to join AA for various reasons and at different stages in their addiction cycle.

Attending meetings appeared to be essential to recovery. Even women who had been in AA for many years still attended meetings on a regular basis. The women with less time in AA also found meetings vital for their sobriety. Often times, women isolate and drink alone because they try to hide their alcoholism because of shame and guilt (Matheson & McCollum, 2008). Many of their acquaintances would be shocked to learn that they have a drinking problem. When these women decide to do something about their drinking by joining AA, they find other women there with similar stories and drinking histories. This knowledge helps them feel that they are not alone and that there is hope. They now have other women to talk with whom they can relate. Meeting attendance on a regular basis is an important element of AA because it connects new people entering recovery with members who have been in recovery longer. This connection dispels isolation. Women in my study appeared to heal in connection with other women. They entered into the sisterhood of AA and sometimes found best friends who become a major positive part of their life. Women reported connections with other women would be difficult to cultivate if one does not attend meetings on a regular basis. It appears that women in my study utilize AA as most AA attendees would who are serious about their recovery.

As stated earlier, a sponsor is an Alcoholics Anonymous member who serves as a mentor to a newcomer in the program and guides them through the Twelve Steps. It is strongly suggested in the Alcoholics Anonymous program that everyone have a sponsor. According to this study, having a relationship with an official sponsor in AA for new women can be an exasperating and challenging experience on their road to recovery. As one woman explained, "My sponsor is, ironically, the only thing that has jeopardized my sobriety..." There are no "rules" in AA, only suggestions (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 26). However, newcomers are told by other members that it is wise and in their best interest to engage a sponsor as soon as possible. They are attempting to follow all the suggestions and may feel

pressure to ask a woman to be their sponsor who is not a good match for them. When women are attempting sobriety for the first time, having a sponsor may feel like a positive step, but in reality could become a negative experience as related by several of the women who were interviewed. The negative experiences with sponsors, as related by the participants in this study, included their sponsor crossing boundaries by demanding that they not make their own personal decisions about how to live their lives, being jealous of them and raging at them, talking behind their backs, falling in love with them, having angry outbursts at them, and being too busy to listen to them.

Most participants in this study were not inherently against having one person as an official sponsor, but because of their personal experiences, they preferred not to be attached to one person.

This study revealed that the majority of women interviewed had changed their concept of a higher power from the "God" they had been taught as children. AA suggests that having a higher power in one's life will definitely aid sobriety and provide a better and healthier life. Some of these women explained that the "God" they were taught about as a child was a punishing God and they were fearful of him. AA has opened up a new path and new way of conceptualizing a higher power for most of these women. They have been able to "reframe" their concept of a higher power to one that works for them. This new way of understanding a higher power is not relegated only to the women in this study, it is a basic tenet of AA's Twelve Steps, specifically the third step which states, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him" (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 34).

All 9 women in this study understood the sociopolitical thought of being powerless as it applies to women. Constructive ways of changing their thoughts concerning powerlessness developed over time through their recovery, and they realized that there are other aspects of life that they are powerless over. These are different from the helplessness they may have known as a woman in a male dominated society. The women in this study are not obstructed by the word powerlessness that frequently invokes thoughts and images of repression and domination. They did not feel powerless in their lives; they just felt powerless when they drank alcohol, because once they consumed that first drink, they could not control their drinking. Contrary to critics of the Twelve Step association with powerlessness, especially some feminists (Clemmons, 1991), this research indicates that the 9 women interviewed saw the concept of powerlessness as a positive ingredient in their lives as taught to them by the Twelve Steps of AA, specifically Step One.

The women I interviewed found AA to be a powerful tool in their recovery. Some felt they had no choice but to attend AA because of domestic issues or DUI's, while others joined because they feared that if they continued to drink they would lose everything. All of the women agreed that attending meetings on a regular basis is vital to their recovery. While 7 out of the 9 women interviewed did not have "official sponsors," they all had strong connections to other women they could confide in and seek counsel. Most had a different perception of their childhood "God." They learned, through AA, how to develop their own concept of a higher power that works for them. All women in this study viewed powerlessness as presented in Step One as empowering and agreed that this is one of the paradoxes of AA. This study revealed that these 9 women reframed some of AA's Twelve Steps to fit their own needs. They did not feel that they had to do everything AA suggests to remain sober and live a fulfilling and rewarding life.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. The sample (n=9) was small and from the same geographical area, thereby expressing only the opinions of this geographical area. Also, this research only included one interview per subject. More than one interview could have given the participants time to think about their AA experiences and explore their feelings in more depth. This study utilized a snowball sampling method therefore the sample is not random and participants may be members of the same AA meeting groups and therefore not as representative of diverse experiences.

Implications

Treatment specialists need to be aware of gender-sensitive treatment and the various reasons why women join AA and how their connections and relationships with other women alcoholics help them to achieve and maintain sobriety. Results from this study indicate that new women in AA could potentially be harmed emotionally by a sponsor and could end up in relapse if they have not developed relationships with other women who would be willing to come to their aid if their sponsor places them in distress. Women need to be coached and cautioned about choosing a sponsor, and should be informed that their sponsor should not be allowed to control their lives and make all decisions for them.

Concepts of powerlessness do not seem to impact women negatively in the AA program and is opposite to some feminist's views of powerlessness as proposed in Step One. The majority of treatment programs advocate a Twelve Step approach, but few advise women that there are other perspectives of the Twelve Steps such as Stephanie Covington's, *A Woman's Way through the Twelve Steps* (Covington, 1994). Her version may give women

a clearer understanding and a more intimate experience of the Steps because it is written in a modern woman friendly style.

Lastly, women in this study developed their own meaning about higher power. Women were able to find hope and strength from this exploration and often came to versions of the concept of higher power that were not directly related to their childhood education of what a higher power was or the traditional Christian basis prevalent in AA. Practitioners should be aware that promoting this exploration can be beneficial and empowering for women.

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