

**VALUES STRESSED BY TWO SOCIAL CLASS LEVELS AT  
MEETINGS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

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This investigation was designed to analyze the values stressed by speakers at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) and to ascertain whether values stressed by members of middle class social status background differ from those stressed by lower class members. Previous investigations (2,3,4) have disclose that class values of his early training become integral parts of the individual's personality and are ever-present guides for what he thinks, what he feels and how he acts. Social class differences operate to maintain barriers against intimate social participation among individuals of different social status backgrounds and make it difficult for them to work, live and commune with one another. American educational institutions, which serve all social class levels, are dominated by teachers of middle class background who stress middle class values, attitudes and goals.

**METHOD**

The investigator attended 16 closed A.A. meetings at Manteno State Hospital in Manteno, Illinois, and 5 open meetings of outside groups. Extensive notes were taken on meeting procedures. Speeches delivered by A.A. leaders and speakers were recorded verbatim as fully as possible. The content of each speech was evaluated and classified in order to determine the type of values stressed and

the amount of emphasis placed on each value. The procedure, which was borrowed in part from the method of a previous investigator (5), consisted of the following steps: (a) Each value explicitly stated in the material or clearly implied by it was recorded in the margin. (b) The frequency of mention of each value was tabulated and emphasis units were totaled. (c) Each numerical result was then expressed as a percentage of the emphasis unit total as a whole.

In all, during a 4-month period, the investigators attended 21 A.A. meetings both in and out of the hospital and recorded 80 speeches of varying lengths delivered by 52 different speakers. The resulting sample contained approximately 30,000 words and 512 emphasis units.

The closed meetings for alcoholic patients at the state hospital were conducted by representatives of A.A. groups from the City of Chicago and its immediate outlying areas. The open meetings outside the hospital were conducted by suburban groups. Social status evaluations of leaders and speakers were based on the criteria adapted by McGuire (6) from Warner, Meeker, and Eells (7) consisting of : (a) occupation, (b) source of income, (c) education, (d) religion, (e) ethnicity. The social status level before downward social mobility through alcoholism was the criterion upon which the evaluation was based. Information for the evaluation was obtained through a questionnaire which was administered orally during an interview with each subject. Values stressed by middle class speakers and lower class speakers were compared. Values stressed by speakers at open meetings outside the hospital were compared with the values stressed by hospital speakers in order to determine whether there was any significant difference between the values stressed at A.A. meetings for hospitalized alcoholics and those stressed at outside meetings.

A group of 50 nonpsychotic alcoholic patients of middle class social status background and a group of 50 nonpsychotic alcoholic patients of lower class social status background, who were either current or former of A.A. outside the hospital, were asked to state their preferences among A.A. speakers during their period of hospitalization, and the values stressed by by speakers selected by

each social class group were compared. Value profiles of speakers selected by the two social class groups were then compared with value profiles of those not selected in an effort to identify differences in emphasis on content. Differences were considered as significant at the 5 per cent level.

## RESULTS

All meetings attended by the investigator both in and out of the hospital were begun with a period of silent prayer. The leader conducting the meeting then introduced the speakers, usually commenting on one or more values emphasized by one speaker before introducing the next. The leader's speech was given last and the listeners were invited to comment or ask questions. The meetings were ended with the Lord's Prayer.

Both social classes were equally represented in the speaker-leader group. The 16 meetings at the hospital were conducted by 12 leaders and 29 speakers coming from 10 different A.A. groups. Six leaders and 14 speakers were of middle class background and 6 leaders and 15 speakers were of lower class background. Both middle class and lower class speakers were present at every program. The middle class group had for the most part been engaged in professional, proprietary, managerial and clerical work, with salary, profits and fees as source of income. The lower class group had been engaged in skilled, semiskilled and unskilled labor, with hourly or daily wages as source of income. The average educational level of the middle class group was 12.8 years with a range of 8 to 16 years of formal educational background. That of the lower class group was 8.5 years with a range of 5 to 12 years of formal educational background. The middle class group was 55 per cent Protestant and 45 per cent Catholic. The lower class group was 43 per cent Protestant and 57 per cent Catholic. Fifty per cent of the lower class group and 15 per cent of the middle class group were first generation Americans of European immigrant parentage.

TABLE 1.—*Comparison of Values Stressed by Middle Class and Lower Class Speakers at Meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous*

<i>Value</i>	<i>Middle Class (N = 20) Per Cent</i>	<i>Lower Class (N = 21) Per Cent</i>
1. Personal story or confession of speaker	25	28
2. Fellowship factor in A.A.	13	20
3. Twelve Steps	14	12
4. The spiritual factor	14	11
5. The alcoholic type of personality	9	8
6. The 24-hour plan	6	5
7. The first drink	6	3
8. Individual's responsibility for maintaining sobriety	5	3
9. Concept of alcoholism as a disease	4	2
10. Working to stay sober and get somewhere	2	3
11. Importance of regular attendance at A.A. meetings	1	2
12. Striving for solid, substantial citizenship in the community	1	2
13. Prestige of A.A. in the larger society	0	1

Table 1 indicates that a common group of values was discussed by the two social status groups. There was no significant difference in value emphasis by the twenty leaders and speakers of middle class background and the twenty one leaders and speakers of lower class background who conducted the meetings at the state hospital. There was no significant difference between the values stressed by the 41 speakers at the hospital and the 11 speakers at open meetings on the outside. This suggests that the list of values compiled in the present study may be typical of those stressed in the larger universe of A.A. group meetings. Analysis of content disclosed that emphasis units were divided into 13 categories which appeared to constitute the A.A. program of reeducation. Examples of emphasis units as stated by speakers representing the two social class levels follow.

#### *The Personal Story or Confession of the Speaker*

*Middle class.* Back in Civil War days, my mother's grandfather was sentenced to hang at Alton for being a Southern sympathizer. He was finally released from the jail with his big Irish trap shut. He was the only one in our family ever to have been in jail besides me. I come from a solid upright American family. Four years ago I got drunk and landed in the clink in Harvey. When I got out of jail I knew that my life was over. I was

an ex-convict. I was disgraced. I could never get another job. I could never hold up my head again. It took me 8 months to get over it and then it was my birthday and I went on a whing-ding again. I wanted to be an upright citizen like the others in my family but I had to escape my fears and resentments with alcohol.

*Lower class.* I started drinking moonshine with the boys in the neighborhood when I was a kid. Your popularity was judged in that neighborhood by how wild you were and I wanted to be popular. I'm 44 years old and have had 25 years of service as a lineman on the railroad. I was suspended 3 times for being a drunk and should have been suspended 300 times. My wife left me once every 6 months for 18 years. I'd coax her to come back and then I'd get drunk and chase her and the kids out again. I know something about the crazy side of life when it comes to alcoholism.

### *Fellowship Factor in A.A.*

*Middle class.* I'm one of you. I know how you feel. We're all alcoholics and drinking is our common problem. Some of you may feel that your folks put you here in the state institution to teach you a lesson that you're not going to learn. But who put us here? We put ourselves here. If you're like me you are a heel when you're drunk and a pretty decent fellow when you're sober.

*Lower class.* In A.A., where all the people are alike, there is a feeling of fellowship. A.A. is a program of unity, working together as a team. There are 120,000 of us, one drunk curing another. One drunk understands another. One drunk can cure another. There has never been an organization like A.A. since the dawn of history. Maybe there is some one here that wants A.A. You're the judge and you're the jury. You vote yourself in and you vote yourself out.

### *Twelve Steps of the Program of Recovery*

*Middle class.* Honesty, humility, faith and courage are the watchwords of A.A. They are approached by the 12 Steps of the program of recovery. Steps 1 to 3 give us an introduction to the philosophy of A.A. In Steps 4 to 9 we find a presentation of the A.A. tools. Steps 10 to 12 teach us to use the tools. Honesty, humility, faith and courage are required if we are to attain or maintain sobriety through the 12 Step program. To an alcoholic, the 12 Steps are comparable to the Ten Commandments in the Bible for they are the key to his salvation.

*Lower class.* There are 12 Steps in the program of recovery and you can't digest all of them at the same time. The 12th Step is the finest one, to help others that need your help. You don't have to work the steps in order, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. You can work them 1, 3, 9, 12 if you stay sober that way. You're going to hear a lot about the 12 Steps, the principles behind A.A.

### *The Spiritual Factor*

*Middle class.* The secret of the A.A. program is love, helping your fellow man, and contacting the Higher Power. Alexander created an empire by force. So did Napoleon. But the empire of love founded by Jesus Christ has lasted throughout the centuries. We must pray daily and practice the Golden Rule to attain sobriety.

*Lower class.* Pure blind faith in God is the important thing to start with if you're going to get sober. Staying dry is not an easy thing for the alcoholic to do but if you pray and meditate daily, God will help you stay sober. When you feel like you've got to have a drink, just send out a message to God and He'll help you.

### *The Alcoholic Type of Personality*

*Middle class.* We alcoholics like to think we're big shots. We're egotistical. Our thinking is immature. We try to twist the world around to adjust to us. We don't adjust ourselves to fit the world. When the world fails to adjust to the alcoholic, he gets drunk.

*Lower class.* An alcoholic always tries to impress somebody that he's something that he ain't. He's very sensitive and easily offended. He gets drunk because he don't get his own way. He's the kind of person that knows it all and he lets his thinking get into a rut. Why blame the wife, the boss, and everybody else? That kind of thinking has to be changed.

### *The 24-Hour Plan*

*Middle class.* A.A. teaches us to live a 24-hour day. We must live one day at a time. We can't live tomorrow and we can't relive yesterday. We must stay sober today and let tomorrow take care of itself. Yesterday is gone forever. The Bible tells us to take no thought for the morrow, as sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

*Lower class.* You just work the program one day at a time. Just the 24 hours that you're living is all that counts. Your biggest job is to live for today.

### *The First Drink*

*Middle class.* If we take one drink, we're off on a binge. We don't dare take that first drink. I've been sober for 5 years but all I need to do is to touch a drink and I'm on my way to the gutter. I know I can't drink like a gentleman. I can't take a drink and then leave it alone. I'm an alcoholic.

*Lower class.* I know a guy that was sober for 7 years and then he took a drink and now he's on Skid Row. He's been drinking for 9 months. Once a drunk, always a drunk. You can't take that first drink.

### *Individual's Responsibility for Maintaining Sobriety*

*Middle class.* I know that anybody that has a sincere desire to quit drinking can quit. Nobody is going to hold you down and pour whisky down your throat. A.A. can bring you great blessings if you decide to honestly and sincerely try the program. It's up to the individual himself. Nobody can do it for him.

*Lower class.* We can't stay sober except through our own efforts. It's up to you if you think it's time to get sober. It's up to you and nobody else. This new way of living is entirely up to yourself.

### *Concept of Alcoholism as a Disease*

*Middle class.* An alcoholic is allergic to alcohol. With him it is a disease. I recognize my alcoholic problem as a disease. A.A. has arrested the disease process.

*Lower class.* Alcoholism is an allergy, a disease. All of us were mentally, morally, socially and economically sick when we came on the program.

### *Working to Stay Sober and Get Somewhere*

*Middle class.* Sobriety is my business. I work at it daily because if I do not have sobriety, I have no other business. My progress stops and I move downward instead of upward if I don't stay sober.

*Lower class.* Sobriety isn't easy going. It's tough going. Alcohol doesn't always remain your chief problem. After you get going on the program, you have other problems, your character and your social standard betterment. You got to move up in the world.

### *Importance of Regular Attendance at A.A. Meetings*

*Middle class.* I wish to discuss the importance of regular attendance at A.A. meetings. You can't stay sober through remote control. You must keep close to A.A. if you stay sober.

*Lower class.* You've got to attend the meetings regular. You've got to keep in touch with others like yourself if you're going to stay sober.

### *Striving for Solid, Substantial Citizenship in the Community*

*Middle class.* A.A. can give us the key to substantial citizenship in the community so that we can hold up our end of the family's prestige, honor and reputation.

*Lower class.* When we come to A.A. we are beaten men, mentally, physically and spiritually. We come in because we are desperate. We are tired of riding in patrol wagons. We're tired of landing in Psycho. We're tired of sleeping in parks and alleys. We're tired of misery. We come into A.A. because we want to carry our own key in our own pocket. We want to take our place in society but we don't know how. A.A. shows us the way if we'll follow. There's nothing wrong with us when we're sober. But we've got to get sober and stay that way if we're going to be citizens instead of lousy, dirty, filthy bums.

### *Prestige of A.A. in the Larger Society*

*Lower class.* A.A. membership is supposed to be anonymous but as far as I'm concerned, I don't care who knows that I'm a member. My boss was tickled to death when I joined A.A. and the employment manager at our place called me in and congratulated me. The people that I work with are amazed that I'm sober after 25 years of drunkenness. They're not alcoholics but now they have just as much faith in A.A. as I have.

There was some overlapping of emphasis units in the foregoing assessment, particularly in the personal story category. Other values included in the confession were classified as part of the confession. The following excerpt illustrates the type of overlapping that appeared frequently as a part of the confession. In this case, a description of the alcoholic type of personality was included as part of the personal story.

I was very egotistical and I was always dramatizing myself. I have always been an easy mark for women. I liked to visit the bars and buy drinks for the Jennies and impress them with what a big shot I was. I was very sensitive and easily offended and if the women in one bar didn't appreciate my importance, I moved on to another bar where they did or at least where they were willing to listen while I shot off at the mouth and lied about myself. I expected everybody to adjust to me. It never occurred to me to try and adjust to them. I was selfish and self-centered and thought of no one but myself. That is the alcoholic type of personality for you.

The spiritual factor was frequently included in a discussion of the 12 Steps and was classified in such cases in the 12 Step category. An example follows.

In the third step we made a decision to turn our lives and our will over to the care of God as we understood Him. It is impossible to get away from the presence of God if you wish to turn and find Him. God is right where you are thinking all the time. Steps 4 to 9 make us better able to understand the presence of God.

The middle class patient group and the lower class patient group each selected 18 preferred speakers from the total of 41 in the speaker-leader group. Fifteen speakers were the common selection of both groups. Seven of these were of middle class social status background and 8 were of lower class status. Speakers thus appeared to be selected on the basis of the values they stressed rather than on the basis of rank status.

TABLE 2.—*Comparison of Values Stressed by Alcoholics Anonymous Speakers Frequently Mentioned as Preferred and Values Stressed by Speakers Never Mentioned*

Value	Preferred Speakers	Nonpreferred Speakers
	(N = 15) Per Cent	(N = 20) Per Cent
1. Personal story or confession of speaker	21	35*
2. Fellowship factor in A.A.	17	18
3. Twelve Steps	13	12
4. The spiritual factor	13	9
5. The alcoholic type of personality	9	10
6. The 24-hour plan	8	4
7. The first drink	4	5
8. Individual responsibility for maintaining sobriety	6	2
9. Concept of alcoholism as a disease	3	3
10. Working to stay sober and get somewhere	2	1
11. Importance of regular attendance at A.A. meetings	2	0
12. Striving for solid substantial citizenship in the community	2	0
13. Prestige of A.A. in the larger society	1	1

\*Significant at the 3 per cent level.

A comparison of the value profile of the 15 speakers who were common selections of both social status groups and the value profile of 20 speakers who were not selected by any individual disclosed one significant difference. Table 2 indicates that the preferred group of speakers placed little more emphasis on the personal story than on other categories while the unselected group placed considerably more emphasis on the personal story than on any other factor. This raises the question whether a lengthy confession might be more appropriately placed in the more intimate relationship of the informal face-to-face associations of the group. It suggests that the larger group prefers speakers who stress achievement of common group objectives rather than past personal experience with the common group problem.

Of the 512 emphasis units recorded for the two social status groups combined, both in and outside the hospital, 26 per cent represented the personal story or confession of the speaker. Fifteen per cent of the emphasis units were devoted to a discussion of the fellowship factor in A.A. Fourteen per cent were devoted to a discussion of the 12 Steps of the program of recovery, 13 per cent to the spiritual factor, and 9 per cent to the alcoholic type of personality. Seventy-seven per cent of the content of the speeches thus represented these five categories.

Ritchie (8) states that Alcoholics Anonymous may be regarded as a social reform movement in that it deals with a specific phase of the social order. Freud (9) defines character traits as individual attitudes of the ego and Hildreth (10) has defined character education as the formation of desirable habits of feeling, thinking and acting and the formation of right attitudes toward the self and the self in relation to others. The values compiled in this study appear to be concerned for the most part with individual attitudes of the ego and with bringing about changes in habits of feeling, thinking and acting as well as changes in attitude toward the self and the self in relation to others. This suggests that the A.A. movement strives for social reform through a group therapeutic process of character reeducation.

It appears that the Alcoholics Anonymous group life is a directly effective agent for bridging social class differences in the collective activity of the larger problem-centered group where the in-group is made up of representatives of both middle class and lower class social status background who have attained their in-group status through the achievement of sobriety, which is the common group goal.

### SUMMARY

Previous investigations have indicated that social class differences operate to maintain barriers against intimate social participation among individuals of different social status background and make it difficult for them to work, live and commune with one another. The present investigation was designed to analyze values stressed at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and to ascertain whether values stressed by group members of middle class social status background differ from those stressed by lower class members. The following statements list the essential findings:

1. The middle class and lower class were equally represented among leaders and speakers at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and a common group of values was stressed by both social class groups.

2. Analysis of content disclosed that values were divided into 13 categories that appeared to constitute a group therapeutic program of character reeducation.

3. Alcoholic patients of both middle class and lower class background selected a common group of speakers as preferred. The preferred group consisted of both middle class and lower class speakers who had stressed attainment of common group objectives. Nonpreferred speakers had concentrated on past personal experience with the common group problem.

4. The results of the study suggest that the Alcoholics Anonymous group life is an effective agent for bridging social class differences in the collective activity of the larger problem-centered group where the in-group is made up of

representatives of both middle class and lower class background who have attained their in-group status through achievement of the common group goal, sobriety.

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