

**SEEING THE LIGHT:
A Study of Conversion to Alcoholics Anonymous***

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In Western Societies individuals who find themselves unable to control their consumption of alcohol are commonly referred to as alcoholics. The term "alcoholic" is not a neutral descriptive term but one that reflects a variety of ideologies and theories created by medical and paramedical specialists over the last century to explain why individuals compulsively drink to excess (MacAndrew, 1969). Alcoholics Anonymous, whose members define themselves as alcoholics, is an organization that attempts to help individuals solve the problem of compulsively drinking to excess and any associated problems.

Like many other self-help organizations of deviants, many of which are modelled after A.A. (Sagarin, 1970), A.A. has many features of religious sects or cults (1), perhaps most notably a model of resocialization as conversion or redemption (2). A major feature of the conversion process for the A.A. member is his adaptation to a history of failure (and consequent guilt and remorse), especially in the moral realm (3).

A.A. members reconstructing their biographies at A.A. meetings presented, in effect, "moral careers" (Goffman, 1959, 1963). The period just before entering A.A. was consistently depicted as the nadir of a long decline, a period of moral bankruptcy. There were long recitations of "sins" or misdeeds (both of commission and omission), particularly against those closest to them. Then a turning point was reached in the acceptance of the tenets of A.A. and an upswing in moral career began, marked by a radical transformation in behavior and beliefs. A.A. members state that whereas they had formerly lived lives of "sin" and "degradation" over which they then felt great guilt, they now lived morally upright lives and no longer felt any guilt.

* This paper is based on a participant observation study of two A.A. groups in Toronto in the Fall of 1969. I would like to thank Leo Zakuta for a number of helpful criticisms which have been incorporated into the paper.

Lofland points to two major problems which individuals undergoing the profound change demanded by conversion often face: the problems of discontinuity (the loss of the old identity and meaning system) and guilt (4). In this paper we shall analyze the process of conversion to A.A. and its various phases, with special emphasis on the ways A.A. helps alcoholics to come to terms with their "sordid pasts," that is, with discontinuity and guilt. Our general perspective is derived from Goffman, particularly his essay "On Cooling Out the Mark," (5) and the writings of Berger (1963) and Burger and Luckman (1967) on the social construction of reality.

In the first section, "The Alcoholic as a Moral Failure," we examine the imputation of moral meanings to drunken comportment by A.A. members and the ways in which A.A. members reconstruct the phase of their moral careers which led them to join A.A. In the next two sections we deal with the conversion experience per se, with some of the factors which facilitate or retard conversion to A.A., and with some of the mechanisms by which A.A. deals with the problems of discontinuity and guilt.

The prevalent conception in our society with regard to responsibility for intoxication is that the individual is largely morally responsible for becoming intoxicated but loses much of his capacity for responsibility once he has become intoxicated. The medical and the medical and psychiatric conceptions share the common-sense view that the individual has diminished responsibility when intoxicated but, contrarily, regard certain individuals (i.e. "alcoholics") as having diminished responsibility for becoming intoxicated because of physical illness or psychopathology (i.e., "alcoholism") (MacAndrew, 1969; MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1970).

However, the theory that alcoholism is an illness has not gained wide currency in our society (Trice and Roman, 1970, 541-542). Drunken comportment is highly stigmatized in many settings in our society and so are those individuals who are considered to be alcoholics. One common source of stigma is based on moral concerns and couched in the rhetoric of religion. Drunken persons face a two-edged sword of censure in this rhetoric. They are pitied for their weakness and loss of self-control and reproached for their sinfulness (cf. Aharan, 1967:p.38).

When drunkenness is viewed from the interpretive scheme of moral failure (6), we can conceptualize the "alcoholic" not only as one who occupies a deviant status, but as one who occupies a deviant status for which acceptable accounts or excuses for his actions are lacking (Scott and Lyman, 1970). Given the ready availability of moral conceptions of drunkenness, it is not astonishing that the individual who comes to view himself as an alcoholic sees himself as a moral failure. If the alcoholic accepts the ethic of individual responsibility and free will as well, it seems especially likely that he will feel guilt and remorse over his condition. Since others will base their actions toward him on the basis of their definitions of him, the imputations of others

are likely to have consequences on the kind of identity he can proffer to the world at large.

As a participant observer listening to the speakers reconstruct their biographies, I was able to discern definite patterns in their moral careers. All six speakers I heard talked about their past (before A.A.) in terms of progressive moral decline. They cited at length instances of their repeated "immoral behavior" and their "failures" in marriage, work, and other spheres of life.

	Marital Difficulties	Occupational Difficulties
Nancy	Discord	
Jean	Discord; adultery; common-law marriage	Fired because of drunkenness
Pat	A bachelor with problems relating to women	Downwardly mobile; salesman to janitor
Dan	Discord; separation	Downwardly mobile to skid row
Mel	Discord; separation	Downwardly mobile to skid row
Bill	Bachelor (no difficulties mentioned	Fired repeatedly

Since the A.A. members' descriptions of themselves that I recorded were reconstructions of their biographies in the context of formal speeches at A.A. meetings, it is difficult to say to what extent these dramatic tales mirror their experiences. These presentations can be viewed as being bound to the nature of the situation where they were produced (7). As the years pass - considering the evident didactic purpose of these tales - it is quite possible that they are considerably embellished to heighten audience identification. Embellishment or dramatic description of moral failure and moral regeneration can be seen as linked to the pressing concern of dealing with moral failure for the potential A.A. convert.

In A.A. we have an interesting situation which we shall take up in more detail in the final section of this paper. A medical theory of alcoholism has long been formulated in A.A. literature (8) as a corrective to common sense conceptions that drinking to excess is a moral breach. Yet, despite the adoption of this disease conception of alcoholism, moral rhetoric is rife at A.A.

meetings and in A.A. literature. Furthermore, a deep feeling of moral failure and sincere repentance for one's feelings is seen to be essential for personal change.

It is felt that an individual must not only hit bottom but that he must have to experience the cycles of repentance and relapse several times before he reaches what he perceives to be absolute bottom, stops trying to fool himself, and really changes (9). In A.A. argot this is indicated by the distinction between "high bottoms" and "low bottoms." It is allegedly the "low bottoms" who are ripe for the new interpretive scheme for redefining their existence that A.A. proposes. The belief is held that the alcoholic must experience total darkness before he "sees the light" and experiences "true" conversion (10).

CONVERSION

Conversion refers to the acceptance of and commitment to another world view or meaning system (Berger, 1963:pp.50-51). Such a process requires the individual to drastically re-assess and change his past and present behavior and beliefs. Berger and Berger and Luckmann list some of the conditions which must be fulfilled:

1. The availability of an effective plausibility structure...mediated to the individual by means of significant others, with whom he must establish strongly affective identification (and ideally, engage in regular interaction with)" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:p.157).

2. "An interpretation of his existence including in this interpretation an explanation of the meaning system he has abandoned. Also ...tools to combat his own doubts." (Berger, 1963:p.52.)

Conversion to A.A. requires the heavy drinker to accept a radically new meaning system which basically involves a moral regeneration. If we examine "the twelve steps," the corner-stone tenets of A.A. ideology, we see that #1 to 11 deal with the means to achieve spiritual regeneration. This includes accepting oneself as an alcoholic. The twelfth step is a call for the A.A. convert to become an apostle working for the goals of A.A. The twelve steps are as follows:

"1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Acceptance of the A.A. meaning system in A.A. tales of regeneration often comes about in a satori-like (11) fashion - the sudden "seeing of things through new eyes" - especially when the individual feels he has reached the absolute bottom.

In an A.A. pamphlet the prototypical conversion experience of Bill W., one of the founders of A.A. is described:

"Lying there in conflict, I dropped into the blackest depression I had ever known. Momentarily my prideful obstinacy was crushed. I cried out, 'now I'm ready to do anything to receive what my friend Ebby had.' Though I certainly didn't expect anything, I did make this frantic appeal: 'If there be a God, will He show Himself.' The result was instant, electric, beyond description. The place seemed to light up blinding white. I knew only ecstasy...I seemed to be on a mountain. A great wind blew, enveloping and penetrating. To me, it was not of air, but of spirit. Blazing there came the tremendous thought, 'you are a free man.' (Further, Bill W. adds) Conversion does alter motivation, and does semi-automatically enable a person to be and to do the formerly impossible. Significant it was that marked conversion experiences came mostly to individuals who knew complete defeat in a controlling area of life." (Bill W., n.d., 9, 10.)

All the speakers I observed emphasized, sometimes very dramatically, that their conversion to A.A. coincided with the acceptance of a higher power, usually God.

Pat. In the Don Jail I experienced a feeling of the utmost degradation. I got down on my hands and knees and begged God to get me out of the grip of this obsession. Then miraculously, I felt a powerful force surging in me. After I got

out of jail, I begged my mother to take me back, resolving I should start anew. Shortly after I joined A.A.

Bill. Thought I had been an agnostic, I discovered the meaning of a higher power and a faith in God. From then on I lost all desire to drink.

Mel. I was converted. I saw the light. I don't mean that in the literal sense. The only time I ever really saw the light was when someone punched me in the mouth for being loud and vulgar.

For the newcomer to A.A., the validity of the A.A. conversion experience and the worth of its tenets are put across by the speakers and A.A. old-timers who are living testament to the value of A.A. An important aim of A.A. is that the audience be made to identify with the speaker, to put himself in the speaker's shoes and say, "look at how far down he sank and yet he made it." As Dan put it, "this speech will be worth it if just one person hears his story in what I've said tonight."

The flash of insight and acceptance of a higher power may not be enough to keep the alcoholic sober. This faith must be maintained and support must be given to the plausibility structure the individual has of A.A.

"The plausibility structure must become the individual's world displacing all other worlds, especially the world the individual 'inhabited' before his... (conversion)...This requires segregation of the individual from the 'inhabitants' of other worlds, especially his 'cohabitants' in the world he had left behind. Such segregation is particularly important in the early stages of alternation (the 'novitiate' phase). Berger and Luckmann, 1967: p.158.)

The new convert to A.A. is encouraged to go to as many meetings as he can. Some will even go to a meeting every night of the week in order to keep themselves out of the pubs. Warnings are given about the dangers of missing A.A. meetings and also of consorting with individuals who frequent places where liquor is served. Peter W, told of how he went to pubs with drinking friends of his, intending to drink ginger ale, and wound up drunk. The case of Mel's hospitalization illustrates how A.A. itself becomes a sort of functional equivalent for alcohol in the alcoholic's life. It is a particularly striking example of the necessity of constant re-affirmation to maintain the A.A. member's plausibility structure.

"After the operation everything was a hazy blur and I had a shaky view of the world, Lying in bed unable to go to meetings, it was then that I saw the real insidiousness of alcohol. I began to go squirrely. I was slipping; I thought I was going to go nuts. I had to have A.A. or else I'd be back in the gutter. Giving up A.A. through no fault of my own, I began to have all kinds of doubts and questions. I had to get established in A.A. again quickly and read the literature when I couldn't go to meetings."

An interesting feature of A.A. ideology which is indicative of the sect-like nature of A.A. is that the methods of other

organizations and institutions for dealing with "alcoholism" are challenged in favour of the knowledge based on personal experience touted by A.A. This is expressed in A.A. literature in the contention that only A.A. can really help the alcoholic because only A.A. understands.

"...We have tried hard to capitalize our one great natural advantage. That advantage is, of course, our personal experience as drinkers who have recovered. How often do doctors or clergymen throw up their hands when, after exhaustive treatment or exhortation, the alcoholic still insists, but you don't understand me. You never did any serious drinking yourself, so how can you? Neither can you show me many who have recovered." (Bill W., n.d.:p19.)

I heard many individuals state that neither religion nor psychiatry nor medicine could help their problem. Pat, an Irish Catholic, humorously described his encounters with a psychiatrist and various priests:

"I went to a psychiatrist, and after considerably money and time all he could tell me was that I should stop drinking. I don't suppose it was the psychiatrist's fault, but I just wasn't with him...I respect men of the cloth, but there is no way that they can help us unless they have been alcoholics themselves. When I told one priest that I was worried I was an alcoholic, the priest said, 'Pat, you're not alcoholic. Come, let's have a drink and talk about it.' Both of us wound up loaded, but the good father didn't have the problem of walking home...I took the pledge to never touch alcohol so many times...Five minutes later I would be having a drink. I used to take the pledge at a church near the H---- Inn, so I could get there quicker..."

The disavowal that medicine and psychiatry can help is especially interesting since A.A. ascribes to a disease concept of alcoholism. The stress in A.A. is not on "curing" alcoholism for the belief that alcoholism is a disease which can only be "arrested," not "cured." The change that A.A. promotes is a moral or spiritual one and is to be achieved through spiritual means, not medically. While examples of this belief can be readily gathered at A.A. meetings, a classic or proto-typical case can be found in the conversation between Dr. Carl Jung and an alcoholic named Mr. R., recorded in A.A. literature. Dr. Jung told Mr. R. that alcoholism was such a severe neurosis that it could not be cured except for a few exceptions, where a great spiritual change took place.

"Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements...Ordinary religious faith isn't enough. What I'm talking about is a transforming experience, if you like. I can only recommend that you place yourself in the religious atmosphere of your own choice, that you recognize your personal hopelessness and that you cast yourself upon whatever God you think there is. The lightening of the transforming experience of conversion may then strike you. Thus you must try...it is your only way out." (Bill W., n.d.:p.6,7.)

CONVERSION AND THE "COOLING OUT" OF FEELINGS OF FAILURE AND GUILT.

Cooling out refers to a reduction of the feelings (e.g., anger, guilt, shame) which accompany one's perception of oneself as a failure. Conversion to A.A. leads the alcoholic to be effectively "cooled out" in many ways.

The Satori Experience

The Satori experience of seeing things through new eyes refers to the A.A. member's experience of seeing the world through the "lenses" that A.A. tradition (norms, beliefs, values) provides. A.A. can give the alcoholic a new outlook on the world and a particularly abrupt temporal distinction between then and now - before A.A. and after A.A.

"Prealteration biography is typically nihilated in toto by subsuming it under a negative category occupying a strategic position in the new legitimating rupture is thus identified with a cognitive separation of darkness and light." (Berger and Luckman, 1967:p160.)

Self-Forgiveness

There are frequent injunctions that the alcoholic learn to forgive himself after he had tried to make amends where possible to those he had harmed. Self-acceptance of one's "higher power" is almost encouraged. When Jean felt guilty about abandoning her children she states that her A.A. husband told her, "God forgives you. Don't put yourself greater than God. Learn to forgive yourself."

"Confessions" to a Sympathetic Audience

A.A. speeches are sort of semi-public confession or "purification ceremony." The speeches, moreover, are given to an understanding, sympathetic audience who can confirm the speaker's "rebirth" or new status through applause and other forms of approval.

Elevation Ceremonies

The awarding of pins for abstaining from alcohol for varying periods of time are the converse of what Garfinkel refers to as degradation ceremonies. They announce, even if only to the circle of fellow A.A.'s, that the individual is achieving success in transforming his personal life (12) (Lofland, 1969:p227.)

Social Integration

Integration into a respectable community which endorses the conventional values of North American society gives the alcoholic a degree of respectability and a sense of personal normalcy. A.A. and its ancillary organizations AL-Anon and Alateen provide the

alcoholic and his family with the opportunity to interact informally with others who will reinforce the A.A. ideologies.

The Medical Legitimation of Alcoholism

While A.A. members attribute a variety of causes to "alcoholism" in their talk at A.A. meetings, most members seem to be aware of the medical definition of alcoholism (i.e., that alcoholism is akin to an allergy) favoured by A.A. An interesting question broached earlier in the paper is, what are the functions of the medical model of alcoholism for the socialization of A.A. members given the predominant moral-ethical focus in A.A.? While we do not have adequate data on the way A.A. members use and respond to the medical model of alcoholism a number of explanations can be tentatively offered. First of all, A.A. can be viewed as a "cooling out" agency which provides the alcoholic with acceptable new accounts for his "condition" and a new socially acceptable social role to play - that of the "sober alcoholic" (Gellman, 1964). What happens, in effect, when alcoholism is defined as an illness - even though this definition is subject to qualification - is that the alcoholic's degree of stigma is reduced. He has what seems to be a more acceptable legitimate status. His alcoholism is then construed - at least in his own eyes, if not in the eyes of others - as a legitimate response to objective conditions, and not as a product of his moral weakness (13).

Secondly, the medical and moral perspectives toward alcoholism may be seen as complementary. The allergy or disease model of alcoholism states that once alcohol is ingested by an "alcoholic," physiological mechanisms or compulsive cravings are set into motion which are difficult to reverse. The moral question may then be seen to arise in regard to the initial decision to touch alcohol once one knows its effect.

CONCLUSION

The efficacy of the "resocialization" process many "alcoholics" undergo in A.A. seems to be closely linked to the transforming nature of the conversion experience. Conversion, in its prototypical form, takes place when the "alcoholic," after reaching a state of moral bankruptcy ("low bottom") accepts the twelve steps and achieves a state of moral regeneration. A.A. serves to "cool out" the "alcoholic's" sense of moral failure by providing him with "acceptable" accounts of his condition and new social relationships (with their emphasis on "fellowship") which legitimate his existence as a person.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cain (1965:p542,547) contends that A.A. is "one of America's most fanatical religious cults" and sardonically comments on the reverence accorded to A.A. relics and rituals.

2. The choice of the term "conversion" is quite consistent with A.A. terminology. We A.A.'s are quite indifferent to what people

may call this experience of ours. But to us it looks very much like conversion...(Bill W., n.d.:p22.) Trice and Roman, 1970:p542 provide a useful discussion of the use of the repentant role by A.A. "The A.A. member can assume this repentant role; and it may become a social vehicle whereby through contrite and remorseful public expressions, substantiated by visibly reformed behavior in conformity to the norms of the community, a former deviant can enter a new role which is quite acceptable to society."

3. Such a view is expressed in A.A. literature. "Put it on an individual basis, and the illness is too often seen in the earlier stages as a breach of etiquette, in the latter a deep moral failing." The emphasis is my own. (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1968:P5.)

4.(S)ocial deviants typically feel a sense of shame and degradation over their past deviance. In the midst of imputations of moral normality, the deviant period of the biography is defined as a long stretch of acts that are incompatible with the proffered and candidate self. Actor can come to feel guilt over his history of deviance. He has, in one sense or another, "sinned," and the fact of this sinning in the past must be dealt with - defined and managed - in the present. There is, in particular, the problem of how to relate the past period as a social deviant to his present candidacy for pivotal normality and to his future as a pivotal normal. How can a apparently discontinuous life trajectory be made a related, meaningful train of events?" (Lofland, 1969: p282.)

5. "For the mark (a person who has failed) cooling represents a process of adjustment to an impossible situation - a situation arising from having defined himself in a way which the social facts come to contradict. The mark must therefore be supplied with a new set of apologies for himself, a new framework in which to see and judge himself. A process of redefining the self along defensible lines must be instigated and carried along; since the mark himself is frequently in too weakened a condition to do this the cooler must initially do it for him" (Goffman, 1952:p 456). A.A. can be viewed as a "cooling out" agency which helps the A.A. member come to terms with his sense of failure chiefly through a redefinition of self and the social worlds in which he lives and has lived in.

6. For the common-sense underpinnings of such a scheme (i.e., did the act have to happen? Was it purposefully done?) see McHugh, 1970. (According to McHugh) "...An individual is imputed moral categories only if he is considered to be responsible for something..., i.e., ...if two conditions are met: 1. He must be considered to have intended to commit actions being considered (including statements, thoughts, etc.) and knows the rules that are relevant for evaluating these actions; and 2. he must be considered to have chosen to commit these actions freely or of his own accord, rather than as a result of some external constraint or force. To the degree that those conditions have been met, he will be considered responsible for the actions being judged and will,

accordingly, be subject to moral judgment in terms of the categories of morality and immorality." (Douglas, 1971:p143.)

7. For a good example of an analysis which links accounts to the nature of the situation in which they were produced, see Turner, 1968.

8. "Alcoholism is an illness, a progressive illness that cannot be 'cured' but which like some other illnesses, can be arrested. We agree that there is nothing shameful about having an illness, provided we face the problem honestly and try to do something about it. We are perfectly willing to admit that we are allergic to alcohol and that it is simply common sense to stay away from the source of our allergy (Bill W., n.d.). Although A.A. defines alcoholism as a "physical allergy, with a mental compulsion," many writers including Trice and Roman, 1970, Sagarin, 1970, and Cain, 1965, contend that A.A. tends to disavow conceptions of alcoholism as a psychopathology. "When a recent Ph.D. dissertation on alcoholism was published in popular book form (King, 1961) A.A.'s immediately took the author to task for suggesting that alcoholics could be placed in categories of psychopathology...What was the big idea of saying alcoholics were a bunch of nuts, A.A. demandedA.A.'s prefer to regard alcoholism as a purely physical disease, organic, glandular, metabolic, dietary - anything but mental" (Cain, 1966:p545).

9. "It is believed, probably correctly, that an Actor's first experience of "bottom" is unlikely to make him amenable to the A.A. identity. Two or more such experiences, each more strongly disorienting than the former, are felt to be required to being the alcoholic to the point of requisite 'vulnerability.'" (Lofland, 1969:p252.)

10. A useful distinction between conversion and alteration is provided by Travisano (1970:p600-601). "Conversions are drastic changes in life. Such changes require a change in the 'informing aspect' of one's life or biography. Moreover there must be a negation (often specifically forbidden) of some former identity. Conversion is signalled by a radical reorganization of identity meaning and life....(Alterations) are relatively easily accomplished changes of life which do not involve a radical change in universes of discourse and informing aspect, but which are part of or grow out of existing programs of behavior."

11. Satori is the Zen Buddhist term for the experience of enlightenment.

12. "Public appearance before a formally assembled group, the public profession of one's personal transformation, organized congratulation on membership and write-ups in a group's newspaper, newsletter or magazine, function, however tentatively, to solidify unanimity and therefore a new conception of self." (Lofland, 1969:p228.)

13. Turner 1972 provides a useful analysis of how pressures to engage in deviance may be reduced by "avowing" a deviant role.

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