

Alcoholics Anonymous in a Western U.S. City*

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Summary. Description of two groups of Alcoholics Anonymous includes data on the relationship between attendance during a 4-month period and abstinence at 6-month and 30-month follow-up studies.

In his monograph on organizations of deviants in America, Sagarin (2,pp.45-46) raised the issue of how successful is Alcoholics Anonymous:

"How can one accurately count the people (not to speak of the successes) in an organization which, in its own words, is composed of 'men and women who consider themselves' members? What are the standards for such membership? Must one attend a certain number of meetings before he can 'consider himself' a member? How long does he have to remain sober? Is AA successful if a member only drinks less, not stops completely? Or if he only gets drunk on rare occasions, not, as he used to, often? What about a person who attends only one meeting? Is he listed in the branch reports on members? No AA study that I have ever seen has ever considered these questions, let alone suggested answers for them."

The present participant-observer study of A.A. in Highplains City,** a Western community of nearly 50,000 people, attempts to answer these questions. Most of the study was conducted between

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* Much of the material presented here is based on a thesis (1), which contains a discussion of theories of alcoholism, the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, previously published works on A.A., more detailed information on the history and current status of A.A. in Highplains City, and an extensive bibliography.

** "Highplains City" is a pseudonym, as are the names of the two A.A. groups studied.

11 June and 13 October 1973. Two brief follow-up studies were conducted 6 and 30 months after the latter date. All 105 meetings of Highplains City's 2 A.A. groups, the Wagonmasters and the New Hope Group, were observed during this period. A brief description of the history and status of A.A. in Highplains City will provide a background for the presentation and interpretation of data.

Historical Background

The first A.A. group in Highplains City began in 1947 after a local woman with a drinking problem was visited by a friend from California who had recently achieved abstinence through A.A. Within a few weeks, five women and one man were meeting in various residences two or three times a week. Later in the year, a small group of men, one of whom had learned something of A.A. from a friend, began to meet in a room over a saloon, next door to a brothel. When the men's wives objected to their meetingplace, they met in the basement of a local church. Meanwhile the predominantly female group held regular meetings at the home of the man in their group. When this man "slipped" in the fall of 1950, the women rented a small room in the downtown area, but they were able to meet expenses only because A.A. members in two neighbouring communities helped support them.

By 1953, the men's group was meeting in a room provided by a local business. An attempt to merge the men's and women's organizations failed, apparently because of members of each group felt that the other was trying to take over. The original groupings continued to meet, the women getting together at irregular intervals in the homes of various members until the mid-1960s, when the group ceased to exist.

Between 1950 and 1954 a small A.A. group met at the military installation near Highplains City. Members of this group formed close relationships with the A.A. groups in two communities adjacent to Highplains City, but their relationship with the men's group in Highplains City was strained. The military group felt that the civilians men's group in Highplains City wanted people to come to their open meetings, but the civilian men never wanted to go to other groups' meetings. The military group appears to have been fairly successful, but rapid turnover of personnel at the base made it difficult to maintain a nucleus of long-term members.

By 1956 there was, for all practical purposes, only one viable A.A. group in Highplains City - the Wagonmasters, a continuation of the original men's group. A construction foreman who joined the group in 1956 helped obtain land and formed a nonprofit corporation to build and own a clubhouse, which opened in 1957. Although it is against A.A. principles for A.A. groups to own property, this principle was circumvented by five A.A. members' formation of a nonprofit corporation. This corporation rented the quarters to the Wagonmasters.

In 1968 the New Hope Group began to meet in another area of the city. The group met initially in rooms provided by service organizations, but later met under the auspices of Project Hope, a mental health agency devoted to alcoholism rehabilitation, at its facility. Thus at the time of this study there were two A.A. groups in Highplains City. Although there was considerable overlap in attendance, members tended to see one or the other as the home group.

Format of Meetings

The Wagonmasters met at 8 PM, Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, and the New Hope Group met at 8 PM, Tuesday and Thursday. Meetings usually lasted 1 hour, although most members lingered a

while after the meeting - to talk or play cards with friends or to give new members more encouragement to join A.A. and help them feel at ease.

All meetings of the New Hope Group were discussion meetings. The chairman for the evening gave the preamble, an introductory statement about the aims and principles of A.A. and then asked individual members to comment or to discuss any other topic they might want to talk about. Everyone attending such a meeting was free to comment, question, agree or disagree at any time.

Most meetings of the Wagonmasters were discussion meetings similar to those of the New Hope Group. If there were a dozen or more members present, the chairman would occasionally use a different format, that of the "speaker" meeting. At this type of meeting the chairman calls speakers to a podium. This is "standup" speaking as contrasted to "sit-down" discussion. The speaker meeting was the format for Tri-City meetings (quarterly meetings with members from two neighbouring communities) and for birthday night (celebrating the anniversaries of members who have been abstinent for one or more years).

Both groups discussed a wide range of subjects, all related to alcohol and alcoholism. Seldom was a meeting devoted to a single topic. Members might discuss personal problems, or how to refuse drinks, or how to stay away from old drinking companions without offending them, or their concept of a Higher Power. The drunkalogue, a personal history of drinking, was not popular, although at one time it apparently had been.

Chairmanship of meetings of both the Wagonmasters and the New Hope Group was voluntary and was not decided in advance. At the beginning of a meeting, usually after some hemming and hawing, someone simply assumed the chair. Under this system, most chairing was done by a few members. The chairman's job is relatively simple, yet it does require some skill to run a good meeting. The chairman must be able to sum up, maintain continuity, juggle talkers and nontalkers, give everyone a chance to comment, and keep the meeting from running longer than an hour.

Motivation to Join A.A.

Most members are pressured into joining. For them, life has become unbearable. Often they are physically or emotionally ill or in trouble with the police, creditors or courts; almost always, their family, friends and employer have "had it." Many of the A.A. members in Highplains City were referred by institutions such as a state hospital or a Veterans Administration hospital. Others were referred by physicians, ministers, welfare or social workers or employers.

The simplest way to contact A.A. in Highplains City is to call the listed number of the Wagonmasters. Beside the telephone at the clubhouse, there is an extension in one member's home. Or, one can call Project Hope and be put in touch with the New Hope Group. The Highplains City groups often received calls from persons at the bus or train station. These calls were usually from persons "on the bum," who in effect "make an A.A. living." They travel from place to place, getting food and lodging from A.A. members or alcoholism

rehabilitation facilities. When a person gets in touch with A.A., one of the members calls on him if he desires. This is Twelfth Stepping.* The problem drinker, not a friend or relative, must ask for help. Frequently calls are received in the early hours of the morning, usually after the bars have closed. Although an A.A. member will talk to any caller, usually he will not attempt to visit anyone who is intoxicated. Generally, anyone who is intoxicated is in no shape to converse rationally, is sometimes argumentative, may be "blacked out" (amnesic) and often is out of drink and sees the A.A. member as a possible source of supply. (An exception made in Highplains City if the caller was a local A.A. member who had "slipped.")

Sponsorship is the act of launching a member in A.A., guiding and advising him, and more or less watching over him. In some instances, sponsorship entails involvement in aspects of the prospect's life other than alcoholism. Unlike what is apparently common in many other A.A. groups, neither the Wagonmasters nor the New Hope Group used individual sponsorship as much as group sponsorship, in which almost every member is available to the newcomer for aid and advice.

Definition of Membership

According to A.A. tenets, if one states that he is an A.A. member, he is a member. That is all that is required for affiliation. There are no other requirements except a desire to stop drinking. No member of A.A. has the authority, right or privilege to deny affiliation to any individual who has a desire to stop drinking. In A.A., both membership and alcoholism are self-defined. Membership is not lost because of absence from meetings or drunkenness. As long as a member is trying to abstain, a binge does not disqualify him. In Highplains City, those who went to only one or two meetings and then attended no more were not considered members by those who attended meetings regularly. There were also a number of persons living in Highplains City who had achieved abstinence through A.A. and had maintained it, yet had not attended a meeting in years. These persons were still considered to be members, although they were nonparticipating.

Participating Members

During the period of this study there were 62 persons who, according to themselves and to the others studied, were participating members of the Wagonmasters or the New Hope Group or both. To some it may seem that the determination of who is a participating member is an arbitrary and subjective judgment. It is. However, a consensus was reached through participant observation of these groups and through extended discussions with those attending meetings.

Sixty-two people, then, were the participating members involved in this study. Certainly there were many more attendees at meetings, but they will be discussed below. Of these 62, 32 (27 men and 5 women) attended meetings of both the Wagonmasters and the New Hope group and 24 (19 men and 5 women) attended only the

Wagonmasters' meetings. Six members (4 men and 2 women) attended only the New Hope Group's meetings.

Of the 62 regular attendees, 50 were men and 12 were women. With the exception of 4 Mexican American men, all members were Whites. Most of the regular attendees were 40 to 60 years old. Specifically, 2 were in their twenties, 11 in their thirties, 28 in their forties, 14 in their fifties, 5 in their sixties, and 2 in their seventies.

Sixteen of the 62 members were college graduates. Eight of these 16 attended only Wagonmasters' meetings, 7 attended both the Wagonmasters' and the New Hope Group's meetings, and 1 attended only the New Hope Group's meetings. Two occupational groupings were heavily represented. Of the 62 regular attendees 9 were railroaders and 10 were in the construction and building trades. Of the remaining 43, 10 were in various professional and managerial occupations, 5 had sales jobs, 5 had military background (4 of the 5 being retirees and only 1 being on active service duty), 4 in addition to these military retirees were retired, and the remainder were housewives or were employed in a variety of other occupations. The 24 persons who attended only Wagonmasters' meetings had the highest socioeconomic status; the 32 who attended both Wagonmasters' and the New Hope Group's meetings were of slightly lower socioeconomic status, while the 6 attending only the New Hope Group's meetings had, on the average, the lowest socioeconomic status.

Attendance

Attendance at 105 meetings, 36 of the New Hope Group and 69 of the Wagonmasters, was recorded*. With the exception of visitors (discussed below), regular attendees accounted for 974 attendances at 105 meetings, an average attendance of 9.3 (10.6 if visitors are included). The average attendance at the 36 meetings of the New Hope Group was 9.6, while the average attendance at the 69 Wagonmasters' meetings was 9.0. The New Hope Group had an average attendance of 10.0 per meeting on Tuesdays and 9.3 on Thursdays; the Wagonmasters averaged 11.4 on Monday nights, 7.5 on Wednesdays, 11.0 on Fridays and 6.6 on Saturdays. The Wagonmasters' Wednesday and Saturday meetings were "open" while Monday and Friday meetings - which had better attendance - were closed." All meetings of the New Hope Group were open.

The Wagonmasters did not adhere to a rigid distinction between open and closed meetings. Most members seemed to believe that nearly everyone who attends has a good reason for being there, and therefore they were anxious not to close the door to anyone.

The 56 persons who attended Wagonmasters' meetings were present at an average of 11.2 meetings while the 38 who attended meetings of the New Hope Group were present at an average of 9.0;

*Because most of these data were collected during the summer, some of the regular attendees were not present at meetings in Highplains City but were attending meetings elsewhere while they were on vacations or working out of town.

the 32 persons with dual membership attended an average of 215 meetings, 12.5 with Wagonmasters and 9.0 with the New Hope Group; the 24 who attended only Wagonmasters' meetings averaged 9.4 meetings, while the 6 who attended only meetings of the New Hope Group averaged 10.0.

The men attended an average of 16.4 meetings, the women 12.8. The 27 men with dual membership had the highest average attendance, 22.9 meetings; the 19 men who attended only Wagonmasters' meetings averaged 9.5 meetings; the 4 men who attended only meetings of the New Hope Group averaged 7.5. Two women who attended only the New Hope Group's meetings averaged 15.0 meetings; 5 women with dual membership averaged 14.0; and 5 women attending only Wagonmasters' meetings averaged 10.6. Thus it is evident that persons with dual membership particularly men, are the backbone of A.A. in Highplains City.

Another way of looking at these data is in terms of individual members' frequency of attendance. Of the 62 regular attendees, 6 became participating members, and 1 died, during the study period. Of the remaining 55, 27 attended meetings less than once every 2 weeks; 9 at least once every 2 weeks; 14 at least once a week; and 5 at least twice a week. Of the six who became regular, attendees during the study, 3 attended at least once every 2 weeks, 1 at least once a week, 1 more than twice a week, and 1 over 3 times a week.

Visitors

During the study period, there were 136 visitors at A.A. meetings in Highplains City. Of the 136 visits, 73 were at Wagonmasters' and 63 at the New Hope Group's meetings. Fifty-five of the visitors were A.A. members from other cities, and 42 were wives, sons, daughters and friends of A.A. members. Because the data were collected during the summer, many of the visitors were members and their spouses who were travelling on vacations. The visitors at Wagonmasters' meetings were vacationers as well as visitors from the A.A. groups in two neighbouring communities. The remaining 39 visits were by transients, attempters and the curious, most of whom attended a meeting or two and were not seen again; the majority of these persons attended meetings of the New Hope Group.

It was impossible to determine how many of the 39 visits by transients, attempters and the curious fell into each category because these persons were not known long enough or well enough by participating A.A. members or the researchers. Certainly, however, A.A. cannot be considered to have failed with respect to all of these persons. The merely curious did not have serious drinking problems but simply wanted to find out something about A.A. Many of the transients undoubtedly had serious drinking problems, but it was impossible to say what percentage were alcoholics. At any rate, the Highplains City A.A. groups were not oriented toward reaching transients and changing their lifestyles. Obviously, A.A. did not reach the attempters - alcoholics or persons with severe drinking problems who gave A.A. a brief try, whether under pressure from someone or as a result of their own decision. Some probably decided that A.A. was not for them or that they were not ready for A.A. Some probably returned to A.A. in Highplains City or elsewhere, as

it is not unusual for individuals to try A.A. more than once before admitting to themselves that they are alcoholics. Because of this unknown percentage of cases in which A.A. succeeds in the long run, it is perhaps too harsh a judgment to say that A.A. fails because it does not reach alcoholics the first time around.

Success of Members

It is impossible to sum up neatly and precisely the success or failure of these two A.A. groups. Success in A.A. is measured in terms of individuals, and it is a phenomenon of the present. A basic precept of A.A. is to try to stay abstinent just 24 hours at a time. Regrets for yesterday are unproductive; tomorrow has not yet arrived - think about it when it gets here.

What is success? Six months of abstinence? Six years? Dying abstinent? What about the person who attends A.A. meetings for years, never remains abstinent for longer than 6 months, but is abstinent 99% of the time? Is an individual a total failure if he is an abstinent member of A.A. for years, but then decides to drink again and is dead within a few months? One member of the Wagonmasters was abstinent for 4 years in the 1950s, then took an 11-year "drinking vacation," and then returned to A.A. and remained abstinent for over 7 years. Is an individual who attends a few meetings and decides A.A. is not for him a failure if he later returns to A.A. and becomes abstinent? We can present some 6-month and 30-month follow-up data on the 62 participating members of the Wagonmasters and the New Hope Group.

At the 6-month follow-up, 2 of the 62 individuals had been abstinent for 15 years. Both were men who attended only Wagonmasters' meetings. Another 8 members, all men, had been abstinent 10 or more years. Of these, 1 attended only meetings of the New Hope Group, 2 attended meetings of both the Wagonmasters and the New Hope Group, and 5 attended only Wagonmasters' meetings. Another 6 members (including 2 women) had been abstinent from 5 to 10 years; 3 attended only Wagonmasters' meetings and 3 attended both Wagonmasters' and the New Hope Group's meetings. Thus, 16 of the 62 persons studied had at least 5 years of continuous abstinence, and another 21 had achieved between 1 and 5 years of continuous abstinence.

What of the other 25? One man died abstinent during the data collection period. Five persons, including one woman, had less than 1 year of abstinence but seemed to be doing well in A.A. Seven, all men, "disappeared"; at least five of these are known to have left the city. Another 7, while achieving some success in controlling their drinking, were not abstinent. And 5 quit trying: a woman had almost 4 years of abstinence before she began to drink again, a man had over four years of abstinence before he returned to the bottle, and 3 men who had tried A.A. during the study period quit before the 6-month follow-up. Thus, of the 6 persons who became participating members while the study was in progress, only half were abstinent after 6 months.

At the 30-month follow-up, 2 men were dead. At the time of his death, 1 had been abstinent for years, while the other was never able to achieve abstinence. Of the 10 men and 1 woman who had moved

out of town, 4 were known to be abstinent when they left, 3 were drinking periodically, 1 was drinking heavily and the drinking status of 3 was unknown. Another 5 men and 1 woman were known to be in town but were not attending meetings. Of these 6, 1 was drinking periodically, the drinking status of 1 was not known, 2 other men and women were drinking heavily, and 1 man had been institutionalized for alcoholism. One man was drinking but attending meetings; 4 men and 2 women had "slipped" at least once but were not drinking at the time of the follow-up. Six men and three women had been abstinent for less than 5 years, 10 men and 3 women for 5 to 10 years, 7 men and 3 women for 10 to 15 years, and 4 men for more than 15 years.

Of the six persons who became participating members during the data collection period, at the 30-month follow-up 2 had been abstinent continuously; 1 had left town but was abstinent when he left; 1 had left town and was drinking periodically when he left; 1 was drinking periodically and not attending meetings; and 1 had been abstinent for about a year, had "slipped" disastrously, but had begun attending meetings again and was doing well. Thus, after 30 months the drinking behavior of at least 3 of the 6 who began attending meetings regularly during the study period was promising.

As to any relationship between frequency of attendance during the study period and abstinence 30 months later, there was no such relationship if one considers only individuals who, after 30 months, were drinking, had slipped but then were abstinent, or who had between 1 and 5 years of continuous abstinence. It should be noted, however, that none of these individuals attended meetings at least twice a week, and only 2 attended as many as 1.5 meetings per week.

For individuals who had been abstinent for 5 or more consecutive years, the attendance pattern was quite different. About two-thirds attended at least 1.5 meetings per week. All 5 of the persons who attended at least 2 meetings a week were persons who had been abstinent for at least 5 years.

Conclusion

Certainly these A.A. groups have not been totally successful. A few of the visitors, although undoubtedly alcoholics, were not attracted to A.A. Three of the 6 persons who became participating members during the study period were not abstinent at the 30-month follow-up. One person died without achieving abstinence, and 1 man was institutionalized for alcoholism. Several individuals continued to drink whether they stayed in town or moved away. Six persons slipped at least once.

On the other hand, at the 30-month follow-up, 42 of the 60 members still living were abstinent and living in Highplains City. One man had died after years of continuous abstinence. At least 3 of the 6 persons who had become participating members during the study period appeared to be abstinent. Five persons who had moved away were abstinent when they left town. One man attended meetings regularly although he had never been able to attain abstinence through A.A. were living in the community but no longer attending meetings. In addition, both the Wagonmasters and the New Hope Group

were viable organizations. Many new persons had become regular attendees, and attendance at meetings had increased substantially.

In Highplains City, A.A. was not successful in arresting the drinking of every alcoholic who attended a meeting or even became a regular attendee. Nevertheless, participation in A.A. led to some abstinence while it resulted in others' reducing their drinking and periods of drunkenness.

References

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2. Sagarin, E., Odd man in; societies of deviants in America. Chicago; Quandrangle; 1974.